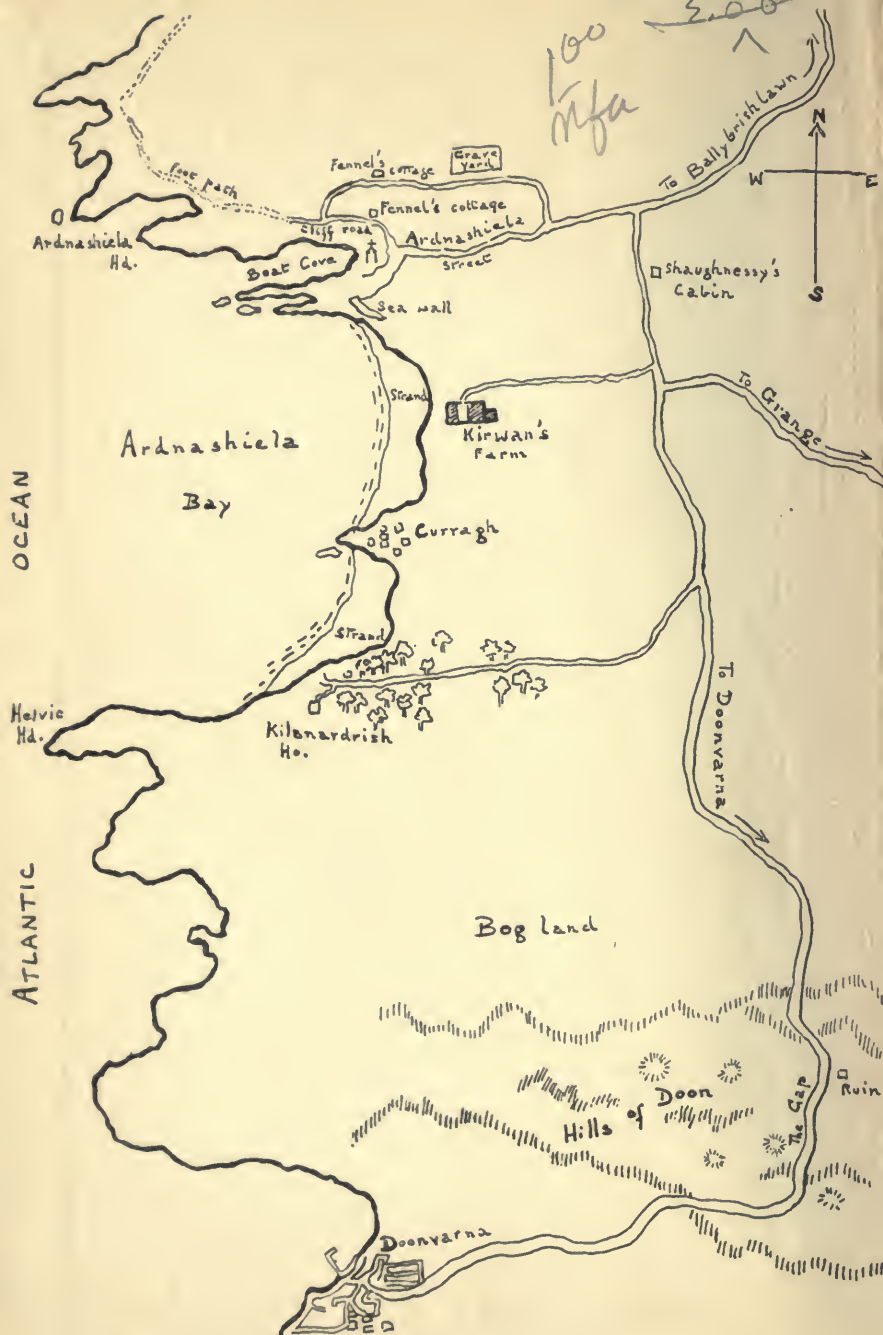


THE MIRACLE

L. TEMPLE THURSTON



Harold H. Jensen

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THE MIRACLE

E. TEMPLE THURSTON

BOOKS BY E. TEMPLE THURSTON

THE MIRACLE

THE GREEN BOUGH

THE CITY OF BEAUTIFUL NONSENSE

THE WORLD OF WONDERFUL REALITY

ENCHANTMENT

THE FIVE-BARRED GATE

THE PASSIONATE CRIME

ACHIEVEMENT

RICHARD FURLONG

THE ANTAGONISTS

THE OPEN WINDOW

THE APPLE OF EDEN

TRAFFIC

THE REALIST

THE EVOLUTION OF KATHERINE

MIRAGE

SALLY BISHOP

THE GREATEST WISH IN THE WORLD

THE PATCHWORK PAPERS

THE GARDEN OF RESURRECTION

THE FLOWER OF GLOSTER

THIRTEEN

THE MIRACLE

BY

E. TEMPLE THURSTON

AUTHOR OF "THE GREEN BOUGH," "THE
CITY OF BEAUTIFUL NONSENSE," ETC.



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PROLOGUE

THERE was a man came all the way from Conne-
mara, wrote a poem in Gaelic about Mary Kirwan.

It has been made into stilted English and clumsily fitted perhaps to some tune for printed cheaply on sheets of paper, some coloured pink, some green, some blue, it is sold as a song in the streets of Dublin, Limerick, and Cork by hucksters trading their wares in the gutter.

Amongst the many songs, the words of which are sold like this throughout Ireland, all printed on flimsy sheets of coloured paper, it is not easy to find. Maybe it is out of print by now.

The first verse of it, in like character to the rest, runs in this fashion—

“One day I’ll take my feet down the hard road, the long
road,
When there are sweet evenings I’ll come back again to
Ardnashiela Bay,
For there’s what they would be drinking there and good
talk by the peatty fires,
And a pale woman, so gentle at the listening, you’d forget
what you would say.”

It continues like this in many verses in praise of Mary Kirwan, in one couplet describing her still more closely—

“Light had its way with her eyes and times when she’d be
listening
Her lips would make your words the way she’d kiss them
for their thought—”

No attention is paid to the metre of the lines and it is difficult to understand to what music they could be sung. But as a picture of her, they have no doubt greater accuracy and sharper illumination than any verses more obedient to the laws of true poetry.

A "pale woman" aptly describes her when it is understood that they often speak of a girl as a woman in those parts of Ireland, alluding more to her attitude towards life than to her age or state. At the time that this was written of her, Mary Kirwan was no more than twenty-one. But to the old man who wrote it, as he saw her sitting there by the peat fire in James Kirwan's kitchen, and observed her—as he must have done—listening to his tales, she was no fidgeting, frivolous girl, but a pale woman and so gentle at the listening to his stories of the world, that, upon his own admission, he often forgot the thread of his narrative in watching her.

There is something of a picture, too, in those verses, of the kitchen in Kirwan's farm at Ardnashiela. He does not actually say it was in the kitchen he told his stories, but any knowledge of West of Ireland life must suppose it.

Without doubt he was one of those travelling men, not exactly a tinker and certainly no vagabond. There are many of them in that country who cannot stay long in one place. They walk the roads from one farm to another, potato digging, helping at the threshing, making the corn. Sometimes they are to be found seated by the fire in a cottage in the far West and in return for a rough bed on the floor and the food of the house, lending their hand at the making of the kelp.

They ask no wage for their labours and are taken in more for the love of God than any real value of service. Usually they are too old to lend more than a feeble hand, yet seldom is a welcome denied them. For their usefulness is not only on the land, but in the house. They will drag the peat, fetch

the water from the spring, and at nights take their seat in the chimney corner, turning the bellows wheel and telling their tales.

Doubtless this last is the greatest service they render and perhaps it is, when their tales are all told and there are none left to listen, that they go. Quietly into their hand the farmer slips some pieces of silver. Into a cloth—sometimes an old shawl—they tie their insignificant belongings, pick up the blackthorn stick which, during their sojourn in that place has stood in a corner of the wall and, with words of parting—"God rest all here," or the like—they set out down the road they came and the green land in the gray light of evening takes them into itself. They pass out of the life of that house as silently and unexpectedly as one morning they came into it.

Some are reserved by nature and these stay but a little while in any place. But mostly they love the sound of their own voices and never weary telling their stories of Oisín and Deirdre, of Conchubar and Queen Maeve of the faeries. And some there are that tell only tales of the villages, of those who live in the mountains and by the sea, the gossip as it were of Ireland, gathered from one place to another where they would be going. Some again will have the gossip of the world on the point of their tongues. Often are they those who in their younger days have crossed the water in their travels, wandering in Scotland and England, even to the big towns, and taking whatever work fell to their hands.

From these, such stories are heard as mingle in an amazing medley the mythology of ancient Greece and all the visions of paganism the world has ever seen. Impossible it would be to know how they have gathered them, inconceivable to suppose how they had threaded them together. Unable frequently to read or write, their tales will yet contain such incidents as are reminiscent of the wanderings of Aeneas and

his sojourn in Carthage, of Paris and Helen, Caesar and Cleopatra, Dante and Beatrice, these, as kings and queens of Ireland, sometimes even with common village names well known to all, will figure in those stories they tell by the peat fires at night, with the folk of the house gathered around them and the light of the flames lighting up the listening faces as the bellows wheel is turned.

Without doubt it was one of these travelling men, working a season, long or short, at Kirwan's farm in Ardnashiela, who must have written this poem about Mary, the daughter of the house.

Occasionally in the verses—there are thirteen in all—such a phrase as—

*“—the lonesome, slipping hours,
When the last hand shuts the door against the fall of night”*

shows with some felicity the picture of the time of day in which his tales were told. So also does another couplet give a sight of him telling them.

*“And beyond the tale I would be telling and the sharp note
of the wheel
I could hear the sea come always round the bent line of the
strand.”*

And not of him only is that picture, but also, to those who know the West of Ireland, of that farmhouse of James Kirwan's, with its whitewashed walls and its quadrangle of farmyard in the square of linneys and cowsheds that stood nearly a mile from Ardnashiela within the elbow of the bay. All the South-West storms of the Atlantic blow upon it as it stands there alone, without a tree to shelter it, two fields in from the shore.

On stormy nights, this old song-maker may well have heard the sea, not only beyond but above the sound of his own voice, though probably he would be the last to admit it.

Kirwan's is a lonely place, even in the best of summer-time. The moonlight on clear nights, shining a liquid violet on its white walls, seems to isolate rather than draw it nearer to the cluster of village roofs. Only in the daytime, with the sun upon it and the cattle moving in the yard, the door thrown open and the coming and going of the men, does it lose any of that aloofness which seems at every other season of the year and time of day to set it apart from human companionship.

He must have been glad, that old travelling man, of a listener to his tales such as Mary Kirwan. Had he heard her story, perhaps he would have immortalised that too in a rigmarole of verses. But evidently, notwithstanding his promise to himself, he never returned to Ardnashiela or certainly, having written one song about her, just of herself, he would have made another in record of all that happened to her.

As it is, there is only this one line in the verses which suggests, more than his picture of her, that fate of Mary Kirwan they know of in Ardnashiela.

"'Twas herself would go beyond the world to walk the ways of life."

That line needs no context to show the almost emotional observation of him who wrote it. Seeing that he, as little as any, could have known the fate of her, it is an extraordinary vision, especially in one so lost in the self-interest of his own stories, as this old wanderer must have been.

For this indeed is the key-note of the life and story of Mary Kirwan, the pale woman, with her white face, her

brown hair the colour of loam, though not so red as some, and those grey eyes she had, the grey of shore pebbles where the water washes them.

"Light had its way with her eyes—" he says. She was only a farmer's daughter, with but little of the mentality that education brings with it, but it was true that light did have its way with her eyes. And seen, as he must most often have seen them, in the deep orange light of a peat fire, doubtless they had such depths as gave him the real inspiration of that line—

*"'Twas herself would go beyond the world to walk the ways
of life."*

PART I

THE MIRACLE

I

THERE are nigh three miles to walk from Ardnashiela going by the first bend of the bay, across the rocks at Curragh and around the second curve of sandy beach to where, at Killanardrish, the Parish Priest's house shelters in the trees. In that protected corner they stand almost down to the shore's edge.

Joe Fennel, the fisherman, had walked those three miles briskly. With the lurching gait that characterises the movements of those accustomed to the cradling motion of the sea, he had little appearance of speed. But it was a long stride he took, not unlike the action of the heavy sweeps he and his men rowed with in his boat. Determination had set his pace and was still evident in his movements as he turned away from the strand where it breaks into the sudden formation of deep red sandstone rock, rising in high cliffs towards Helvic Head.

Without pause or hesitation, he took the path that leads from that corner of Ardnashiela Bay to a narrow lane connecting ultimately with the Doonvarna road. Only when he reached the iron gate in the lane opening onto the drive up to Killanardrish did the urging purpose that was in him appear to relax its hold upon his mind. As though recording an impetus that had spent itself, his hand faltered as he raised it to the latch of the gate; his eyes were filled with a new consideration and his brows creased and straightened

as one determination gave place to another in his thoughts.

He opened the gate and swung it wide on its iron hinges in the loose stone pillar, but it was some moments before he passed through. At last, not so much from a final conviction but as though, having come so far it were a folly to turn back, he entered upon the drive and made his way slowly up to the house.

It was a large square building, weather-slatted, grey and repellent. Had he been able to see it from the gate into the drive, its uninviting aspect might have supplied just that slight impression needed to turn his mind from its purpose and send him back to Ardnashiela with his errand unaccomplished. A cluster of rhododendrons grew in a high shield about it. The upper windows were scarcely visible from the approach. Behind the screen of rhododendrons it conveyed the deceptive suggestion of comfort and seclusion. But once the corner of these was turned and the gaunt, grey building, unrelieved by any kindly creeper, met the eye, staring with its windows—some of them blind—across to the open sea, all preconceived impressions of homeliness or comfort were flung away. It was bleak and drear—the very picture of desolation.

Joe Fennel was not aware of any impression from his surroundings as he passed through the thicket of rhododendrons and came in full view of the house. Stopping and staring at the building another fifty yards or so before him, he just uttered in the sound of his breath the thought that leapt upon him.

"In the name of the Almighty God," he muttered, "why did I come at all!"

Even at that last moment, he would have turned and gone back to Ardnashiela had not a window on the ground floor been opened and a duster shaken out into the air. He turned at the sound, when a sharp voice from within the ill-lighted

room informed him that if he wanted anything there was no call for him to be loitering there.

"Let ye come to the door," called the voice, with penetrating authority. The snap of the shaken duster, the sharp report of the voice, the swift clatter of the window as it was closed, these all fettered the fisherman's thoughts of retreat. He crossed the wide sweep of mossed and weedy gravel to the hall door like a prisoner to the summons of the law. There, on the wide doorstep, already taking off his soft black hat and twisting its broad brim in his hands, he waited until the door was opened. In a moment or two the cavernous hall became a dark, damp and musty-smelling background to the rigid figure of Father Roche's housekeeper.

The name of Mrs. Sheehan was known in Ardnashiela and as far as Doonvarna. Joe Fennel had heard it. He stood before her with some misgiving, a simple man, frightened of women, as some natures are frightened of anything feline. Something about the sex, almost deeper than its inscrutability, made him at all times eager to avoid it. His eyes did not challenge, but fell precipitately before those of Mrs. Sheehan, wherein there was no lustre, no generous inward light. They were sharp, cruel, hard as jet, like a hen's upon her nest.

In one glance, sweeping over Joe Fennel from head to foot, she had weighed him in the scale of her own assessment and was demanding what he wanted in tones of her own valuation. A fisherman from Ardnashiela could want little of importance with the Parish Priest.

"I want to speak with himself."

It was all he would give her except his name.

Forced upon her duty, she left him there, still twisting his hat and, sharply closing the door, she went to Father Roche's room.

"There's a man bi the name of Fennel," said she, "turn-

in' his hat at the door and wantin' to speak with yeerself."

The whole tone of the announcement was intended to convey to him it would be a wasting of his time if he saw the man. She guarded him closely. In that gaunt, isolated dwelling he was her property. Outside it she put forth no claim. But she knew the hot pangs of an arid jealousy when any came to the door of the house at Killanardrish, claiming as undeniable a right as her own to see him. He was sublimely unaware of this. In all the long period of her service, which now amounted to sixteen years, he had never shown recognition of the fact that she was a human being. It is open to conjecture as to whether he ever thought of her as such. It is doubtful whether she would have appreciated it had he done so.

He looked up from the office of his Breviary. Her appearance at the door was scarcely an interruption. He was reading it with automatic exactitude, saying every word aloud in his mind as was his wont, yet in their well-known familiarity hearing none.

"Bring him in here," he said, "in three minutes. And tell him to wipe his boots."

In less than three minutes his office was finished. He shut the book and sat blinking his pale, grey eyes under their thick, white lashes, gazing through the window over the familiar fields sloping down to the belt of trees that hid the shore.

In that same chair, looking out of that window across the fields that never altered, to the sea that was different every hour, the old man had sat and read his Breviary at that hour every day for twenty-three years. It would have shocked him considerably by this time had any one told him he would not so continue to read it to the end of his days.

In the loneliness and isolation of his life in Killanardrish, habit had become paramount. He could not have relinquished

that vision of the sea, yet long had lost all consciousness of its beauty. It was the same to him in its richest blue as in its clouded green when the wave crests snarled and showed their teeth, and, breaking across the bay at Ardnashiela head, rose grey, like ghosts, and flung their arms and vanished.

He was past a realisation of the varieties of nature. If the belt of trees, bare and black all through the winter, one Spring broke earlier into leaf, he did not notice it. Beyond his duties, he was a live man, dead in the grey, weather-slatted house, his body guarded by an old woman whose emotions were like milk, dried to powder and thickening in her blood. Yet she kept him fiercely to herself, and as fiercely he would have held to his habits of life had any one threatened to take them from him.

Once the Bishop had intimated that he might be moved.

"If ye move me from this place," said he, "ye may as well dig a hole in the ground and have done with it." And, after spending one day in his company in that remote house at Killanardrish, the Bishop had left him to his solitude, to his sloping fields and his belt of wind-swept trees and the wide bay spreading out into the Atlantic. Habit had embalmed him. If the wrappings had been taken from off the custom of his life and the unexpected air of change had penetrated the substance of his being, he would have fallen apart in dust.

To this old man, past all human capacity of sympathetic understanding, Joe Fennel, the fisherman, came with the secret he would not have spoken to another soul in the whole country. The eagerness of his confidence had maintained itself without abate for those three miles along the strand from Ardnashiela, but, from the moment of approaching the gate on to the drive, it had begun to leak away. By the time he was standing in the big, high-ceilinged room, his boots wiped to the sharp order of Mrs. Sheehan, his eyes bewildered by the vastness of that apartment in which the old

priest seemed awesome in his loneliness, all feeling of confidence had drained out of him.

Had he been a man of quick thought and happy ingenuity, he would have called up some ready tale and kept his secret close. There were many who came over from Ardnashiela with complaints and gossipings. To the frosted resentment of Mrs. Sheehan, unconcealed from any of them, Father Roche saw them all. With three scattered villages in his parish, he had the broad sense of his duties. But Joe Fennel had none of the shrewd, inventive qualities of his race. When the old priest looked up after the door had closed behind Mrs. Sheehan, the fisherman stood in silence where she had left him, still twisting the rim of the soft, black hat in his hands and shifting the weight of his body from one leg to another, as though to discover an easy attitude to support the discomfort of his mind.

"Well?" said the Parish Priest. "Have ye come three miles from Ardnashiela to be standin' there twistin' yeer hat?"

"I have not."

"What is it ye come for?"

"'Twas to speak to yeerself I came."

"Well, glory be, man! Here ye are standin' in the room with me. If 'tis more comfortable ye'd be, sittin', there's a chair on yeer left and a chair behind ye. I never knew there were so many chairs in the room till I look at ye standin' there."

"I'll remain as I am," said Fennel, as though by taking a chair, he feared he should pledge himself to that which as yet he felt might quite possibly never be said.

Father Roche blinked his eyes at him. He was accustomed to this behavior. In and out of the confessional he met it at every turn of his duties, and found that the less ready of speech they were who came, albeit voluntarily, to confide in him, the more incumbent it was upon him to hear them

out. Those who flung themselves headlong in a torrent of words, he often arrested with a gesture before they had had time to become immersed.

Looking at Joe Fennel, whom he knew vaguely as one of his Ardnashiela people, recognizing in the blue knitted jersey underneath the short coat, the occupation he followed, knowing by constant contact with them on that wild coast the simple-mindedness of those who answer the calling of the sea and sensing that the man had something resting heavily upon his mind, Father Roche curbed his impatience a moment longer and made one more effort to extract his confidence.

"Ye're an egreegious fool," said he, "if ye'd come all this way to be tellin' me what's on yeer mind and then not have the wits to be sayin' it."

With a wrench at his hat, Fennel sat down on the chair behind him.

"I'll tell ye so," said he, and gathered all the forces in himself for his confession.

II

“**M**E lobster pots are after being taken on me.” This simple statement of fact appeared to need no more than mere directness for its utterance, yet Fennel lowered his voice and spoke upon his breath as though others than the priest might hear him.

“It seems to me,” said Father Roche slowly, “there’s some few of ye in Ardnashiela and up in the hills and about, have a way of thinkin’ this house is a court of Petty Sessions and meself the R.M. and the old woman outside a sergeant of the police or, maybe, a clerk of the court itself. If ’tis stealin’ yeer lobster pots they are, ’tis nine miles and not three ye’d better be goin’ to the constabulary in Doonvarna. Arn’t they eatin’ their hearts out playin’ cards and fishin’ the time they’d be waitin’ for a case would give them a chance to earn their pay.”

Fennel moved uncomfortably. He had never sat upon a chair with springs in the seat of it before. After the hard chair in his cottage at Ardnashiela, and the rough board for a seat in his boat, which often the night through would be the only rest he had, this luxury of comfort had little substance in it to support the discomfort of his thoughts.

“’Tis not stolen they were, but taken,” said he, and watched the priest’s face and twisted his hat again and wished more fervently than ever he had never come out to Killanardrish.

“Taken?”

He bit the word short and said no more.

The fisherman nodded his head, waiting uneasily for the purport of his information to reach the old man's mind, tracing the passage of it with unwonted observation quickened by fear of laughter.

Father Roche locked his eyebrows together with a heavy frown.

"If 'tis the way ye're comin' here," he said deliberately, "an' ye thinkin' I'm one of those have lost their wits believin' in mad tales of faeries and the like, 'tis three miles ye've walked for nothing more than the good of yeer health. What d'ye mean—taken—man? They're gone, are they?"

"They are."

"An' 'tis the sea has them—is it? Or one of those French trawlers with their thievin' nets?"

"They're taken, I'm sayin'," Fennel persisted, obstinate, unyielding, and with so deep a conviction as to make the priest realise the futility of argument. Laughter, truly, was left him. Watching the earnest expression on the fisherman's face, he hesitated before he used it. It would have been effective with many another. An instinct, untranslating into conscious perception, gave him doubt as to whether it would be effective here. Had it been fear that had brought the fisherman there to Killanardrish, laughter was an excellent antidote for fear. Whenever it came to his notice, smiting its victim on dark, mountain roads, leaping out in bleak farms, echoing in sounds of horses' hoofs, he laughed without mercy, a discordant note of laughter. None cared to hear it, and those who did, never confessed a belief in the "gentry" to him again. He had come to believe that with that laughter he was driving ignorance and superstition out of his parish. He had so much as boasted of it to the Bishop. Yet here, scrutinizing the steady gaze of Joe Fennel, the fearless eye with its glitter of simple faith, he debated whether it were wise to use it.

"What is it ye want?" he asked. "Why have ye come out here to me in the name of God? 'Tisn't because a priest has his orders taken, he can be doin' tricks would beat the cuteness of the constabulary in Doonvarna. Shure, I can't help ye, man! If yeer pots are gone—they're gone! Let ye be makin' new ones and that's the best advice I can be givin' ye. Was it the whole of them was gone in one night—or what was it?"

The fisherman gripped his hat and told his story of a night on the sea washed pale with moonlight, when himself and another of his men, spinning for mackerel, had seen a cluster of black birds as big as solan geese, flying round about the boat. They mewed like cats, he said, and the sound of the wind in their wings as they beat about in circles was the sound of voices and they all singing together with lips closed, like a host of people would be humming or moaning or keening, maybe, for the dead.

Father Roche sat and listened, bushing his white eyebrows like grass tufts haired with frost, lacing his fingers and unlacing them, and every few moments taking a pinch of snuff from a black, horn box he kept in his waistcoat pocket, rattling it in his nostrils and automatically brushing away the fine stream of dust that settled on the lapel of his coat.

Laughter, he knew, would be of no service here. It was not eagerly the story was being told him. He detected no sense of a mind weighted with self-importance, anxious to impress the wonder of its experiences. Here was a man in a deep earnestness of faith, wrestling with the unknown in the wilderness. The loss of the lobster pots was not his complaint. The cluster of black birds with the moaning sound of the wind in their wings was not wholly his story. Sitting there on that chair in the priest's high-ceilinged room, the lumps of the knuckles on his hands rising and working like knots of cord as he twisted his hat, his blue

eyes deepened in their blue with the weather tan of his skin, his mouth, clean-shaven, opened sometimes like a child's in wonder and at times closed tight with the mere strength of man in him that saw no fear in a stormy sea or any of the visible terrors of life, he was more than just a fisherman telling a superstitious tale of hardship.

Some sense of this kept the laughter from the priest's lips. He could no more have laughed here, than he would have laughed at a heathen in obeisance before his idols of wood and stone. What could laughter do but scatter fear? And that was the only treatment he knew. He sat back in his chair and stared at Fennel.

"What happened the birds?" he asked. The suggestion that they might be cormorants, magnified in that moonlight in the mind of a superstitious fisherman, was worth no more than instant dismissal. He must know too well the sight of cormorants to be deluded like that. Some strange birds he had seen. The priest felt no doubt of that; yet it was not that which seemed to matter so much as the reaching out of the man's mind to touch the unknown meaning he attached to them.

"What happened the birds?" he repeated.

Fennel laid his hat down on the ground between his feet.

"They cruished on the water," said he, "in a black mass."

"Well?"

"Shure, we pulled up the lines an' we rowin' over to the place to see what birds they were."

"What were they?"

"There were no birds at all."

He raised his head and said it squarely. There was the worst of it and in the sureness of his mind, the worst of it was the truth. He could of course make new lobster pots. Had he not learnt how to twist sally stems into baskets and pots when he was a child, sitting on the sea wall? It wa

not new lobster pots he wanted, or any recompense for the catch he had lost. What power was there to face and defeat this unknown and unknowable beyond which, if not in suspense around the lives of every one, he had reason to know well was surely about his own? This was his quest to Killanardrish. The Holy Church had that power—the power of blessing and cursing. In some way of faith, like a child to hide its head in its mother's lap, he had come out those three miles for the priest to protect him.

"There were no birds," he repeated. "There was the water lickin' the boat, and the moonlight quiverin' on it an' it still and empty like water ye'd be takin' up in the cup of yeer hands."

Father Roche rose from his chair and walked to the window, looking down the fields to the sea. For a few moments, without a thought in his mind, he watched a storm, as countless times he had seen it, gathering up out of the limitlessness of the Atlantic.

"What's that got to do with yeer lobster pots?" he asked presently without turning.

"They were in that place," said Fennel, "and the next mornin' when we pulled out round the third head to be gatherin' them, they were gone."

"Mightn't they have drifted?"

"They had not. Weren't the corks there floatin' on the water?"

"Then one of those French trawlers had them."

"There's been no trawlers on this coast these three weeks."

Father Roche came back to where Fennel was sitting. The fisherman rose to his feet and the two men stood looking at each other.

"I've a curate is in Ardnashiela," said the priest. "Why didn't ye go to Father Costello to be tellin' him yeer tale? Bi all accounts he has an ear to be listenin' to the mad

fancies of folk in these parts. 'Tis a softer heart he has than meself. Why didn't ye go to him?"

The fisherman gave the honest and simple reason that had driven him to Father Roche's confidence. It was the power of the Church he came to, he said. And was not the Parish Priest out at Killanardrish nearer the head of it than his curate in Ardnashiela? Had the Bishop been as near as ten miles, would he not have gone to him?

A smile that lent him a moment's understanding twitched the corner of Father Roche's lips.

"Ye're after tryin' to make me believe," said he, "there are things outside the world we don't know the meaning of. Ye might as well try and make me believe if I put me hands down on the floor and threw up me legs I could stand on me head. I couldn't do it. And I'll believe nothing but what the Holy Church teaches me to believe. And that's all I'm here for. To teach ye the same. 'Tis not believin' in strange things'll help ye in this world. Let ye go back to Ardnashiela and think of the miracle of our Lord's birth and death and resurrection and that'll be enough to occupy yeer mind the time ye're making a set of bran new pots will catch half the lobsters in the bay."

It was the soundest wisdom he could offer. It was the only wisdom he knew—the habitual wisdom of his life. In his youth he had never questioned it, and every year added to the improbability that he ever would. He had indeed grown to resent those events in life which troubled his wisdom and continued to suggest to his mind that all meaning might possibly not be encompassed in the miracles of the New Testament.

To reassure Fennel's mind no less than to soothe his own, he laid his hand in a fatherly fashion on the fisherman's shoulder.

"Let ye go back to Ardnashiela," said he, "there's a storm is comin' up will have ye a drowned man before ye get yeer head under yeer roof."

"Will ye come and say a blessin' over me new pots when I have 'em made?"

"I will not."

"What'll be the good of me puttin' em out so and they taken on me?"

Father Roche threw up his hands and brought them down with a clatter against the skirt of his coat.

"I dunno what's come to some of ye in these parts!" he exclaimed. "Isn't it enough for ye to be believin' the miracles of the Almighty God! Shure, there's James Kirwàn at me always to be sprinklin' the corners of his fields with the Holy Water, and wouldn't I be admittin' the powers of darkness and faeries and God knows what if I did that!"

Fennel stooped and picked up his hat and without another word he went to the door. As he opened it, he turned round.

"If ye weren't an old man, Father," said he, "I'd take ye out the length of one night in me boat the time ye'd be comin' to find there was strange power in the darkness and a world of things ye wouldn't know or see or hear with no more'n a wisp of the air between ye."

In a long pause they looked at each other and then, before the priest could answer to shatter the silence with common sense and rhetoric, Fennel had passed out of the room and closed the door behind him.

The old man stood for a while looking at the closed door before he went back to his chair by the window. There he sat, with his hands met and locked on his snuff-stained waistcoat. He blinked his eyes under their white lashes,

watching the approaching storm heaping up out of the South West as he had so often seen it before, and accepted its coming as surely and unthinkingly as he accepted the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.

III

FENNEL found his way to the door in the cavernous hall, drawing his breath with a deeper freedom once he had opened it and passed out into the daylight. In that house with its fastened windows, its curtains and closed doors, the very presence of air and light seemed to have been forbidden. His senses had not been alive to this. He had not been conscious of the musty odours that clung heavily with the pervading damp to every carpet and curtain and even to the wall-papers themselves in Father Roche's house at Killanardrish. Such perceptions as he had were not tuned to subtleties like these. In that interview with the Parish Priest he had felt only the presence of the irrevocable barrier between the ritual of the Church and this enveloping belief in a world—beyond that wisp of the air, as he had described it—which surrounded him.

It was only when the outer air was again on his face and the salt sting of it once more in his lungs, that he knew in a dull consciousness how oppressing that barrier had been. Believing surely the power of a priest of God could defend and protect him with a greater magic than any in that other world about him, he had come out there to Killanardrish with a simple faith in which there was no questioning. All he knew now was that it had failed him. It might have explained. But it had explained nothing. With its great wisdom and learning it might have protected him from the maliciousness of that power he felt had chosen him for its sport. It had even refused him this.

He walked across the unweeded gravel to the open way,

through the thicket of rhododendrons, unconscious of the sharp eyes of Mrs. Sheehan watching him from the lower windows. Down the whole length of the drive to the iron gate in the loose stone wall and out into the breen he passed with his lurching stride, lost in his mind as a dog is lost in the streets. He was wandering aimlessly from one incomplete and inarticulate thought to another. The priest would not put a blessing on his lobster pots. Then of what use was his fishing to him with the spell that was set against him? To himself he was like one whom Fate has singled out for the play of her power over the lives and ways of man. Yet of Fate he knew nothing beyond the characteristic expression of the people in those parts, "It'll all be the same in a hundred years." If that was Fate, he knew it, but had no other term for it than this.

But of the strange and little people, inhabiting that proximitous world beyond the thin veil of time and space, he knew all they all knew in those wild parts of the land. He knew their malice, their mischief and those good services they had been known to do. But how could they be pleased? And what angered them? Only the priest with his Holy Water, with the blessing or the curse he had could help him. And if the Father would not protect him against their molesting will, what could he do? There was nothing to be done. If they had singled him out, then, like many another he had known of, they would have the sport of their ways with him as they wished.

Down the lane to the shore where the beaten oaks and hawthorns hid the light, he walked with himself in an impenetrable darkness. It was not until by the footpath through the trees he came out on to the shore and, beyond the sand of the bay and the jagged green line of threatening sea, he saw the storm gathering in its welter of inky clouds, that he found the return of possession in himself.

Here was a power he knew and felt no need of the hand of God to wrestle with. The very sight of the heaping clouds braced a conscious courage in him. The rising wind struck saltly on his teeth as his lips parted. That foreboding of the storm, which to so many carries with it a sense of impending disaster, lifted the spirit to an exaltation in him. He turned towards Ardnashiela, knowing well the Parish Priest had spoken with no exaggeration when he had said he would be a drowned man before he could get his head beneath his roof.

He had passed the sharp jetty of rocks at Curragh, where a scatter of cottages gives that desolate place the dignity of a name, before the first, leaping flash of lightning ripped up the belly of the clouds and forked into the sea. Almost like a song in his ears the thunder spoke out after it. This was music of a world he knew, less terrible to him than the music of the wind he had heard that night in the wings of the circling birds.

He lifted his head as he listened to it rolling between the headlands. Wind and the sweeps of spray across his face were more real than thoughts. All the time he had been talking to the priest, it was a mere passing of dull sensations he had had, not so much as born into any form of thought. Sensation was dull in him no longer now. There was a wind to lean against and thunder that sounded less confusing than words in his ears. Above his head the shrieking gulls with toiling wings were climbing the hills of the gale to turn upon the summit and scatter back like wisps of sea foam blown across the land. Thickened to muddy green with the sand they churned, the waves came flinging their scum up the shore, grinding the pebbles and leaving the brown sea-weed in dank masses, a dark line along the strand.

In all that two-miled stretch of sandy beach, his was the only human figure to be seen, yet there was less loneliness

in his soul than when he was standing in the company of Father Roche in that room at Killanardrish.

It was as he neared James Kirwan's farm, the only habitation between Curragh and Ardnashiela, that the first rain fell, splashes that buried in the sand and hit his face and dropped with a loud noise upon his hat.

With a swift calculation, he measured the mile and more it was to Ardnashiela, creeping in to the cliff side where the strand broke into the sandstone rock as upon the further side of the bay. With a quick eye he plumbed the depth of rain to come out of the clouds heaped up in leaden masses to the horizon's edge.

"'Tis a drowned man I'd be entirely," he said aloud and turned with his thought to the broken, loose stone wall James Kirwan built about his field, a feeble protest against the ever-increasing hunger of the sea.

In the linneys and sheds that formed the square of the farmyard before the long, thatched, one-storeyed house, he would find a place for shelter. There was no wish in him, a shy and timid man, to be going into the house itself, where maybe there would be company, and it was only the farmer, James Kirwan, he had slight acquaintance with.

The gate into the yard cried a rusty tune as he opened it. At any time they might have heard that in the house, but the rain now was sheeting upon the thatch in a roar of water and every moment the lightning rushed down the black fields of the sky with the thunder leaping an instant after, shaking the ground with the noise of it.

A cobbled path in front of the house, passing the windows and the door, led to a shed where they cut the chaff. It communicated in a procession of doors through stables around the whole range of buildings, enclosing the accumulation of mire in the farmyard. He could have chosen that way and saved his feet from the muck of the yard, but they

would have seen him passing the windows. Instead he walked through the heavy manure, with the brown liquid sucking around his boots, till he came to the first door in one of the sheds. He opened it and went in.

It was a cow-shed with three beasts tethered, nibbling the loose hay in their troughs and fretting for the meal due to them at the approach of the milking hour. He closed the door and stood shaking the water off his hat, brushing it too from his coat with a distaste for the wetness of rain.

Five empty stalls there were. It was a long shed. James Kirwan could supply such demand as there was in Ardnashiela, and, with three cows only, keep enough for their needs in the house. In two of the empty stalls, loose hay was thrown ready for the cows' feeding. Fennel sat down on a truss of it cut solid from the stack and listened to the rain and the rush of the rivers it made in the narrow gutters, incapable of holding that sudden volume of water, spilling it in loud streams into the yard outside.

With the walls of the building about him, the thoughts of his errand to Killanardrish, of what the priest had said and the waste of his walking, came back in a slow current to his mind. With no clear knowledge of what it meant or how now, with the spell that was against him, he was to turn his face out to the sea again for his fishing, he sat there dwelling upon the words of Father Roche and the things that had happened him.

As he sat there, the soft, sweet scent of the cows crept in with his breath and lingered in his nostrils and he felt it mattered little what way he was treated by the world, if there were kindness only coming to him that would help him to be bearing the sorrows of life. For it seemed he knew then, as he had never known before, that he was a lonely man in his cottage on the cliff in Ardnashiela and there was little use in the success of his fishing and the

money he had saved if in the end he was to be put away in death below the grass in the graveyard on the top of the hill.

If there were melancholy in these thoughts, there was a certain pleasure too he took in their sadness and it was not the pleasure of pity for his loneliness, because with his timidity he had always sought to be alone. More it was he felt that if life could have so much sorrow in it, there must somewhere be as great joy and if it were never his lot to find it, still it was there. As he breathed in the air, sweetened in that place with the scent of hay and the breath of the cows, a kindness of life, it seemed, was not far from him then. Wherever it was, could he hold it, it would not be mischief or malice the faeries would be putting upon him, but a good heart for his fishing and a peace when death came for him to be lying down under the grass.

It was the sound of a door being swung on uneven hinges and footsteps at the far end of the shed that startled him out of the wandering of his mind and brought him, standing softly to his feet, to see who it was.

A girl had come with a bucket and stood to milk the cows. Slipping her body in between their heavy carcasses to give them their evening meal, she was half hidden at first. He stood in silence watching her. Presently she emerged. Completely unaware of his presence there at the further end of the shed, she sat down on the stool, leaning her cheek against the first submissive beast, and began her work.

Between the hammer blows of thunder, he stood listening to the squirting of the milk into the bottom of the pail, a muted note to mingle with the hiss of rain upon the thatch. It had a sweet sound and of the same kindness that had come into his thoughts.

With the tilted bucket gripped between her knees, he could see only the lower part of her body beneath the belly of the cow. A small black dog of uncertain breed, small as

a large terrier but with the head and long coat of a sheep dog, was lying by the side of her. It had the contented air of being conscious of her companionship and lay quite still. Occasionally it would raise an eye as though the sight of her were a satisfaction. With a fascination that had no curiosity for herself, Fennel stood there, silent and motionless, watching the rhythmic play of her hands and the twin streams of milk they guided dexterously into the pail.

Sense of time passed away from him. The storm crossed over their heads, travelling inland. He did not hear the sound of the thunder retreating into the distance. Only the long spurts of milk grew a clearer note and the clasping and unclasping motion of her hands fixed his eyes the more and held them to their watching.

He was quite unprepared when, with the first cow milked, she rose to her feet and, coming round the hind-quarters of that beast to the next, she faced and saw him standing there.

He had seen her before. It was Mary Kirwan, the daughter of the house. He had seen her in the street of Ardnashiela, seen her as he saw all women in any place and strode by them lifting no eye to look. Now, alone in the shed, in the spell of her hands he had been watching, he looked full at her and saw the pale face and the grey eyes below the brown hair, and the lips parted in a live astonishment.

It was then in a revelation, he beheld the kindness of life that was near to him, the power, closer than a priest's blessing, that would give him a good heart for his fishing and bring that peace when death came for him to be lying down under the grass.

IV

"IT'S a fine shtorm," he said awkwardly, intending that remark to explain his presence there in her father's cow-shed. As such she must have accepted it, for she settled her stool by the side of the second beast, continuing with her milking and telling him he would have done better for himself had he gone into the house where there was a fire burning and company, and a kettle over it ready for the fresh tea they would be having when the milk was come in.

He listened to the sound of her voice more than to the words she said, and it did not occur to him to thank her for hospitality. For the sound of it to him was one with the scent of that place, with the music of the milk purring in the pail, the contentful rattle of the cow chains, and the soft constant note of the beasts at their feeding that all had inoculated his mind with this new sense of a kindness in the world.

When they began their speaking, he had left the end of the shed where he was standing and come a few steps nearer where she was at her work. There he leant with his arms on one of the partitions of the stalls to make it seem he was easy in himself to be talking to her and because he wanted to be talking to her then more than doing anything else at all.

"'Tis the first time ever I see a young girrl milking," he said presently, for there was not much they had to say to each other in those first moments after she had made him her invitation to the house and he had scarcely heard what it was she said.

She looked up, turning away her cheek from the cow's flank where it was laid and putting her eyes on his face that was full of the simplicity of youth, with years only the weather had brought to it; deep lines about his mouth the storms had ruttled and a rough tan the wind had seared on his cheeks. It was then he saw—having no readiness of words for it in his mind like the wandering poet from Con-nemara—it was then he saw the way light had with her eyes that looked through and beyond his own so that it seemed to him there was never a man with just a boat and a few nets to his name could ever call her his own.

"Isn't it Joe Fennel ye are?" she asked. "Have a boat in Ardnashiela and would be fishin' across the bay?"

"I am," said he, and knew it was a pleasure he felt because she had recognised him.

She returned to her milking, leaning her face against the side of the beast so that now her eyes were towards him and he had a sense, scarcely related to any thought, of how warm her cheek must be.

"Mustn't it be a grand thing," she said musingly, as her hands played the streams of milk, "to be away out beyond on the water and the land gone from ye, the time there'd be no voices talkin' but the sea only with the song it'ud be havin' in yeer ears."

Had he wished, he could not have appreciated that leaning out of her mind to ways and visions of life beyond the world she moved in. All he heard in her words was what he wished to hear, an interest and a sympathy in the calling he followed. It was not so much as of one who would be quick and clever at the mending of his nets or having the kettle ready boiling for him on the hearth, as of that same kindness, more shielding than the words of any priest against the knowledge of loneliness that had come to him.

"Have ye never been out in a boat?" he asked with some

astonishment, "and ye livin' little more'n a mile from Ardna-shiela."

"'Tis no more strange than yeerself would never have seen a girrl at the milking."

"Shure I've no call to be comin' to the house of those would be farmin' on the land."

She smiled, without giving him her eyes to see the distance and the look of vision her smiling had.

"'Tis meself has no call either," said she, "but to be feedin' the beasts in this place and boilin' the food for the pigs and churning the cream maybe, or scatterin' the corn for the chickens we'd have in the yard."

He bent over the stall where he was leaning, and in a voice that pleaded rather than took for granted the virtue of his offer, he promised to take her out in his boat as far from the land as she could wish in her heart to be going. To an amazement, confused in him with joy that beat up in him like the wind of the storm outside, she said she would come.

It was not so eagerly she said it. Nevertheless there was gratitude, as though, coming there that time of evening, he had found her imprisoned and with his promise had opened a window for her to look through, having no power in himself to set her free.

"When will we go?" she asked. He named the first day it was fine when the storm had cleared to a still sea, the way it would not be tossing in the boat she was, but drifting sweetly in the hot time of the sun.

"Isn't it night and the moon shining ye'd be goin' sometimes with yeer nets?" she enquired then.

He made way for her as she rose to empty her bucket into a big pail that stood by the wall of the shed, and was silent to her question. He waited till she was seated again at the flanks of the last beast. When her hands were working

rhythmically once more and the milk spurting loudly as when first he heard it into the empty bucket between her knees, he spoke.

"Strange things would happen on the sea at night," he said slowly, and watched her face, as he had watched the face of the Parish Priest for laughter. In her there was neither trace nor thought of it. A wonder was in her eyes as she turned her face at an angle to look at him.

"What things?" she asked.

He told her of the black birds and the taking of his lobster pots, having sworn an oath within himself as he walked along the shore from Killanardrish he would never give word or sign of it again to a living being in that place.

"Is it a spell they have put on ye so?" she said.

He nodded his head, and she went on with her milking. She had nothing but silence to offer him, yet that, far sweeter in his hearing than any words of Father Roche.

"I've no great heart for me fishin' now," he said at last, hoping as much to make her speak again as needing to say out the trouble in his mind.

She looked up at him with softer eyes than he thought a woman could have and smiled at him for courage.

"'Tis not a strong man is the like of yeerself should be talkin' that way at all," she said. "Shure won't They have Their ways with all of us and isn't the world a great place for a man to be settin' his power against Them? Didn't Mrs. Flynn is in Curragh beyond over have her man taken from her in a dark night, they never findin' sight or trace of him again and she holdin' up her head while she'd bide the time till he'd be comin' back to her." She smiled at him again. "Men are quare things," she added, "and isn't there great fear of life is in them."

He knew then in some understanding it was fear of life that had taken him out to Killanardrish, fear of life and

the lonesomeness there was for him in the world. But it was more than this he had gained in his understanding. He knew now, even in that short time—as knowledge of the kind does come suddenly to a man who has shut his eyes to it for long—that it was a woman such as this he needed. If she were by the side of him where he could touch her and by the side of his thoughts when she was no way near and he was fighting with the storm maybe, or straining his strength of haul the nets in time, she would drive the sadness out of the world with the kind looks she could be giving him and the soft touch of her hand.

He looked at her hands as she worked and, timid man though he was, he would have spoken then and there with the quick fire of the vision that was moving to flame in his mind. Suddenly the door at the end of the shed was pushed open and the words fell away from off his tongue.

Father Costello, the curate in Ardnashiela, helping Father Roche in his scattered parish, stood in the doorway saying the storm had passed and he had come to tell her they were waiting about the fire in the kitchen for their tea.

Fennel touched his hat and said good-evening. All the shyness of his nature was come back to him then. He was amazed at the boldness her talk and the way of her looking had given him. Having no desire to stay longer, he began moving to the door at the top of the shed by which he had entered from the yard. She had said she would come out with him in his boat. A moment before, could he have hoped for so much as that? If the appearance of the priest had robbed him of the first sight of this new wonder to his mind, at least he carried her promise with him when he went away.

“Won’t ye stay,” she said when she saw his movement. “Won’t ye be stoppin’ and havin’ a cup of tea in the house?”

He would not, he answered her. The storm was over and he would stay no longer. Though he thought he even heard

an eagerness in her voice to be keeping him there, it was not in the company of others he felt he could be talking to her with the shyness he had and his strangeness with people.

"Let ye come down to the boat cove," he said as he lifted the latch—"the first mornin' is fine, and I'll take ye out beyond the bay."

He opened the door quickly as though, even with that, he had said more than he dared and, stepping down into the mire of the yard, he went away. They heard the gate cry out on its hinges. Then the last roll of thunder murmured like a parting message called back to their ears as the storm turned away from the sea and hid itself in the hills of Doon above Doonvarna.

V

MARY continued silently with her milking and, in the same contemplative manner as Fennel had done, the priest leant against the stall watching her. With all the difference there can be between one man's regard of a woman and another's, it was her hands too he looked at, the brown of her hair, blackened against the beast's red flank, and her pale cheek resting upon it like ivory laid in rust.

It was just a simple kindness the fisherman had seen, radiating from the sound of her voice, the soft look there was in her eyes, her quiet way of moving and a tenderness of understanding he seemed to feel in her words when she spoke to him. But what was a kindness? It was all a vague and nebulous sensation he had had. Something he knew it was his life had needed without realisation for many years of his loneliness. His mind had just leaned out to the spirit there was about her. Now he was waiting, like a blind man at the curb, sensing the propitious moment in the traffic. Like a blind man he was crossing to a new thoroughfare in his life—the side of the street where the sun was shining. It was a warmth he had felt coming from her as he watched her. His impulse to reach it had become an intention already. He had asked her to come out with him in his boat.

Closely and more clearly than this, Father Costello was seeing as he stood there watching her. But it was by no means their first meeting, as it had been with Fennel, nor was his mind that uncouth, unfashioned device registering

upon the fisherman's perceptions the thoughts almost of a child.

With his training and the high measure of his intelligence, unusual amongst his class who are drawn so often from the land itself, he looked deeply into life and at times had clear visions of it. And it was the throb of life itself he saw—and had seen always from the first—in Mary Kirwan. Her hands he watched, playing with those streams of milk, seemed fitly occupied to him. Her cheek, leaning against the cow's flank, lay, as he could imagine it should lie, close to the warmth of life.

It was as though he felt he were watching a process of life, the participation of which in himself he had renounced, yet still was eager to see at work. More than any woman whose shadow had just fallen across the solitary path he walked on, he discerned the presence of it in her. At all times he had felt her to be instinct with it. There were moments too, when mere instinct seemed an empty word to apply to her. She demanded life. Sometimes he felt that whether she demanded it or not, the full stream of it must come to her; that its direction and intensity lay in no measure of her will.

He had often wondered who in that village, cast away upon a wild and almost uninhabited coast, could bring it her. And now he had just been witness of the first inception of one of those matches that are made with little joy or beauty in them in the remote country places of that land of Ireland.

He stood there, emotionally observant, wondering, was that the best that could come to her. Drawn sometimes to the fateful look in her eyes and that transparent pallor of her cheeks, he had often designed in his imagination a deeper joy for her than this. A farmer's daughter and uneducated though she was, he had found the faculty of sensitive appre-

ciation in her. She had a way of listening to him when he talked that brought him these impressions. Sometimes he had put them away, had told himself with conviction that like a stream in the earth, life found its own channels and only in such manner did it flow with any beauty at all. Besides, what was it really to him? If she married one of those men in Ardnashiela whose coarseness and crudeness of mind sometimes amazed him, what else was to be expected for her? There was no high opinion he had of James Kirwan, the farmer. She was his daughter. What better life could be expected for her than that with which she was surrounded?

But now there was one who, in the usual way these wooings were begun, had come for her. For honesty, clean living and a Spartan thriftiness, there was not a man in the village to equal Fennel, the fisherman.

The first thought in Father Costello was a prosaic satisfaction when he heard that invitation to Mary to come out with him in his boat. And then it was, while he stood watching her, there came back with the inevitable pressure of belief, the thought that it was little the hands he saw would touch the meaning of life she needed, or her cheek be warmed, or the spirit he felt in her come near to any realisation of itself with Fennel.

The mere insistent recurrency of this idea gave him a sense of discomfort. With a determined purpose he went out of his way to thrust it aside.

"Was it Fennel was sheltering from the storm?" he asked.

"He was, Father."

"There's the best man in Ardnashiela."

Without lifting her head from the cow's flank, she turned to look at him.

"'Twould not be hard," said she, without pause in her

milking, "'twould not be hard with all the drink they'd have taken one time and another. 'Tis an idle life for those would be fishin' in the sea."

He agreed it seemed idle enough at times, but it was not Fennel was idle, he told her, for there was a man was always mending his nets or making new pots to be putting out for the lobsters.

"And hasn't he good money laid away there in his cottage on the cliff road," said he, "with many a woman glancing at him in Ardnashiela would be glad of the gift of a look out of his eyes."

For a moment she stopped milking altogether to look steadily at him. If it was reproach she felt, she did not speak it. Her head bent again as she turned to the finishing of her work.

"What way would ye be tellin' me that?" she asked quietly.

"No way at all," he said at once, but he knew there was reproach and knew moreover it was the same with which he had upbraided himself.

This was a new thing he had learnt of her. In some way she was conscious in her spirit of that demand for life. He had not thought that possible before. Until that moment he had believed she had no perception of herself. Somehow it seemed he gained a fresh experience of her every time they met. For a moment now he felt ill-at-ease. He wished he had not spoken.

"I wanted to give you a good thought of him," he went on, stumbling to explain. "There's not a man in Ardnashiela I'd think well for you to be going out with in his boat—a young girl like yourself—but Fennel only. Shure, he's as true a man as ever threw a net or took his haul out of the sea."

Apparently she had no further wish to talk of it. In

silence she stood up. Her work was finished. She did not look at him again.

When he offered to carry the bucket for her, she consented with a muttered word of thanks. Taking the pail herself with the steam rising in grey wisps from the froth of the milk in it, she followed him down the shed with the little dog closely at her heels.

They had scarcely moved away before she called to him to stop. The milk, full in his bucket, had caught a way on it from his walking. It began swilling over the edge and falling in a puddle with every step he took.

"Ye'd better set that down on the ground, Father," she said, and had no other tone in her voice but that of practical necessity. Milk spilt in the shed when she was milking the cows was a different matter. It was always a custom in the farms to leave that for the faeries. The little streams that fell to the floor when a cow moved and distracted the precision of her aim were always gone in the morning, but here was waste.

He put it down at once with unhesitating obedience and watched her lifting it easily to the balance of the pail she carried in her other hand. Her body was swayed over and her head set at an angle that played to the intangible beauty she had in her face.

In silence he continued opening the doors for her from shed to stables and on as they went. At the last, reaching the door out to the cobbled path before the house, his hand hung in a pause on the latch.

"Is it hurt ye are at me talking about the man?" he said straightly.

"Shure, can't ye say what ye like of anny man, Father? What would there be would be hurtin' me?"

"Ye thought 'twas the way I was interfering maybe, meanin' he'd be a good match for ye."

"I didn't think it at all. Shure, I knew it well."

"An' so he would," said the priest firmly.

She had set down her buckets, waiting in a habit of mind for him to open the door as he had the others. Now she opened it herself and picked up her buckets again.

"He would indeed," said she quietly, as she passed through onto the cobbled pathway and walked along to the door of the house. "He would indeed," she repeated, "if I'd a mind in me itself to be matchin' with anny man at all."

VI

AT the signal of a tapping of Mary's foot against it, James Kirwan opened the door of the house and let her in. With his hands deep in his pockets, clinking a few pieces of copper money, he stood on the threshold, waiting for Father Costello who followed in a muse of thought behind her.

It was early autumn and they had been wanting the rain. The farmer was rubbing together the coins in his pocket in a good humour and hopefulness that was rare with him.

"'Twas a fine shtorm," said he. "Shure, it might have been rainin' silver pieces, the worth it'll put into the corn."

He stood aside to let the priest pass into the kitchen.

"I'll just get me hat," said Father Costello. "There'll be no more rain and 'tis to Cappagh I must be goin' for a sick call."

"Who is it is sick?"

"Mrs. McSwiney."

The farmer tossed up his head.

"Shure 'tis not sick that woman is but old with sour years. Let ye be here in this starvin' parish another month or two, Father, and 'tis tied bi the leg she'll have ye to the post of her bed the way she'd be goin' on greatly with her pulin' and whinin'. Hadn't she Father O'Connor was curate here these last three years destroyed entirely goin' out on the roads to Cappagh, till he came to be knowin' the fidgetty old woman she was?"

If there was little charity in what he said, Father Costello knew well it was true. Nevertheless he went into the kitchen

to get his hat. Coming out of the dairy with her empty buckets, Mary saw him with his hat in his hand turning to the door. Then because of the advice he had given her and the retort she had made and now his going in a haste to get away, their eyes met in a challenge.

"Is it goin' without yeer cup of tea, Father," she said quietly, "and I gettin' the milk, and all ready for ye to be drinkin' it while it 'ud be fresh?"

A longer challenge from her eyes and he might have been the more set upon his going, but she looked at him no further. In silence she went on with what she was doing, standing her buckets down by the side of the red, painted dresser, the lower portion of which was a coop where they kept hens that were broody or in the spring such as were hatching out their eggs.

He stood in a pause at the door. The farmer engaged him in wordy talk about the crops, mingling superstition with a rough knowledge of experience amongst his opinions and predictions and coming, as was in the nature of him, to a moody plaint about the badness of the land and the better times that would never return to the farming again whilst he was in that place.

James Kirwan was a thickly made man, with rounded head and sharp and close-set eyes. Cunning there was in them, craft and no little cruelty too, but it was the cruelty of one governed by his fears, rather than the determination of his nature. Coarse and inconsistent fibre he was to be the stock of so finely elusive a creature as Mary.

It had not been long before Father Costello was made aware of this. When first he came to Ardnashiela three months before, Mrs. Troy, in whose cottage he lived in the Main Street, had sent him out to Kirwan's.

"'Tis mostly all would be gettin' their milk and eggs

and butter at the farm," she said. "Let ye go and be speakin' them yeerself and 'tis the best ye'll be gettin'."

Partly in obedience to that advice and partly in his desire to come to a close knowledge of his people, he had gone. It was this arresting inconsistency between father and daughter that had first sharpened his interest upon them all.

Cut off by a mile and more of ragged beach and rutted road from such human contact as there was in the cluster of houses in Ardnashiela, it stood out above the shore to meet the prevailing storms. They were glad enough of any company in that isolated farm. Once having made their acquaintance in their own kitchen—a comfortable and spacious room to be sitting in, with the cheer of an open hearth and a peat fire the bellows wheel kept glowing on the windy days—it was not an easy matter for the young priest to refuse the eager invitations of the farmer. It was great honour, he was told, he would be giving them to take a meal of tea. As well as this, he liked to sit there talking in the soft scent of the peat or listening to the blind man by the fireside, turning the wheel and telling his tales.

Father Costello had come out there many times since, as new curate to Father Roche, he had arrived in the parish of Ardnashiela, and it had not taken him long to appreciate there was little of the blood of the father running in the veins of the daughter of the house. From her mother's stock rather she came, but there were few if any in those parts—and they had gossip and curiosity enough—to say in what part of the country Kirwan had first set a wishful eye upon his wife.

A dark, silent, remote and impenetrable woman she was, who sat most times in the recess of the open hearth opposite that allotted to the blind man with his labour at the bellows wheel. There it was she occupied a great measure of her time with the plaiting of rush baskets and bags which, as far

as the priest could see, served no purpose in the house or out of it.

To the mystery of that personality, Mary Kirwan owed no doubt much of the distant beauty and elusiveness she had. Even in the looks of them there was a resemblance. Both were dark of eye and the loamy brown of Mary's hair was nearer that of her mother's black than the farmer's sandy grey the years had bleached to a nondescript shade of straw which on a low forehead hung in a matted fringe over his pale, grey eyes.

To a young man, coming from wide travels and a broad sight of the world to this desolate parish—his first appointment—it was with a ready eagerness he sought the companionship and interest to be found in Kirwan's kitchen. Most Sundays he came there after Benediction. There was a readiness for life in him as well as for his work. The fire of asceticism that had flamed to a desire for Holy Orders when he was a young man in Dublin had not been monastic, with a pale and sacred light, but fierce, welding and human in its glow. With all the flushing confidence of youth, he had told himself he had no fear of the world. Life, he had said, was for living by priests and men alike, and it was into the world he would go amongst the lives of men and women to help them with the power of courage and the virtue of faith.

The flint of his purpose gave out its sparks, sharp and penetrating, in his eyes. They were kind. They had laughter in them. As he talked, they shone. And if his face was pale and there were deep lines too readily drawn about his mouth for so young a man, it was because he had found life not quite so easy as he had thought, his purpose not so securely simple, his courage not always so high. But faith, in its fervour, had been always with him, and that faith it was which gave a character to his face that many a woman

had gazed at in some sense of awe and many a man had wished was his own.

"'Tis a good thing," he had said to Father Roche, "for a young priest to be amongst the people. There's not the feeling of awe in them there was at one time when a man would be holding his breath talking to a priest in the street."

The pale eyes of Father Roche had searched his for a moment as though here he had found a young man setting out from the very beginning to interfere with the habit of his life.

"They'll hold their breath," said he briefly—"the same as they always did, if there's a man as well as a priest inside the collar he'd be wearin'."

The younger man's observation was nearer to the truth. If they held their breath for Father Roche, it was more in fear than in respect of him. Having no fear of Father Costello in his wish to be one with them, James Kirwan threw open his door and more than once declared after his departure, it might not have been with a priest of the Church at all they were sharing their meal, but a man only like any would be coming in off the road.

So had grown an interest, passing mere acquaintance, that centered in Father Costello's mind about the character and distant, evasive fatality of Mary Kirwan.

With no motive of petty inquisitiveness, but rather with the interest that accumulated in his visits to the farm, he had made enquiries about Mrs. Kirwan, her origin, her place of birth, the little if anything that was known about her. There were plenty to talk, but few with knowledge in their talking. When he found it was mere gossip he was hearing, he asked no more.

Idle stories they had told him. But if they were idle, they nevertheless revealed to him the subtle infectiousness of an idea that spreads in the minds of those living in lonely places.

Some said it was the evil eye she had. He laughed at that. Others, that she knew more of the faeries than was good for a human woman to be knowing. He shook his head, smiling, as though they were children talking to him and he would not wilfully hurt their beliefs. It was told she had given a herb to a tinker with a running sore on his foot, had come begging to the door of the house. He had bound it to the open wound and in three days it was healed and gone from him. The man had told them himself when they were drinking, all of them together, in Foley's public house. He showed them his foot that was healed and there was no scar or twisted skin on the place at all.

"For what would she be makin' those baskets and bags with the rushes she'd have in a green heap in her lap?"

Mrs. Cotter on the cliff road, who had never been further than the door of her cottage for a matter of ten years, shot that question at him out of the twist that came to her mouth when she had things to be telling about her neighbours.

In all innocence, thinking he was to hear a true statement—it was scarcely a month after his arrival in Ardnashiela—Father Costello enquired the reason it might be. Mrs. Cotter lowered her voice and spoke on the wheeze of her breath.

"Doesn't the world know," said she, "'tis in little rush bags Themselfs would be carryin' the food They'd steal from the house of anny place where They'd be goin'."

He asked no more questions then, feeling it was a folly in him and a shame as well to the hospitality they were giving him where he was a stranger amongst them all. Yet with no wish on his part, insensibly it increased his interest in that strange, silent woman. Often he watched her sitting by the peat fire, her thin fingers slipping in and out between the green rushes and, without showing them to any, laying

the little bags she would be making down on the ground by her side in the open hearth.

It was by this, without his being aware of it, that his interest had gathered about Mary Kirwan. In her he saw the mother remoulded, fused with a different blood, and made human with a wistfulness of understanding that even Fennel, the fisherman, heavy and blunt of mind, had not been slow to come upon.

There had been times in those three months of summer when, in that spacious kitchen, splashed with sun on the white-washed walls through the half-open door, they had found themselves alone with their talking. Once, when they were making the hay in the meadow by the stream that gathers its way out of the hills of Doon, they were in an undisturbed companionship all the hours from tea till the sun set behind Helvic Head.

Their talk was of the simplest nature, conversation led mostly by him, telling her beauties of the places he had travelled in. Deep visions she had in her eyes when he talked of the snow flushed to the colour of a rose on the summits of the Italian Alps at sunrise. Long breaths she drew at the sound of life there was in his words and his voice whilst he was speaking.

It was, as the old travelling man from Connemara had said, the gentleness of her listening and the way her lips had of making his words to hear again the sound of their thought, that sped him on to his speech with her.

Nights alone in the small house he occupied in the village street of Ardnashiela, he would sit reading his books beneath the light of an oil lamp and find himself wondering what they were doing in the kitchen at Kirwan's farm, what tale the old blind man might perhaps be telling and whether that silent woman of the house was even then plaiting the rushes on her lap.

Sometimes when the wondering grew on him till it became a fret in his mind, he would get up and go out into the street, turning towards the strand and the way to the farm, and, when he had gone no further than the sea wall where the fishermen's nets hung in their black draping, turn back. It was too soon to be going out to the farm again, he told himself then. For what would they think of him in the smallness of that place, and was it not leaving his books he was and the thoughts that ought to be near to his mind with them? Yet he knew it was life was there in that farm-house, life more vital and with a deeper pulse in it than ever he could find in the black print on the white page. And it was life he leant to. He felt always he could meet it, face to face, lending faith to it and spurring it to courage whenever it came his way.

With Mary no less, it had grown to be a watching for his coming, a swift focussing of her eyes upon any black figure of a man she saw walking on the strand. With the new interest of his conversation and the appreciative sense in his mind, he was of another order of men from those with whom she had any time to be speaking. Like her father, they all had coarse talk who came to the house. Through long familiarity it had no effect of driving the blood across the paleness of her cheeks, but it left her often sick in heart and mind. It was natural enough he could not have come there too often for her liking.

On those Sundays when he preached at mid-day Mass in Ardnashiela, she sat on the uncushioned bench, forgetting the best clothes she was wearing and listened in an attitude of mind which deluded her into the sensation that he was speaking to her alone. It seemed he was speaking just as he had spoken in the hay-field or as he talked often by the peat fire in the kitchen at home.

This was a ready illusion she had, for he spoke his sermons

with no form of intoning. There were others who felt the same as she.

Coming out of church one morning, Julia Mahon, with surprise at her own daring, had whispered it in Mary's ear.

"I'd feel 'twas the way he'd taken me himself for a piece," she said, "and he talkin' to meself as it might be in a quiet place."

The full justification of Mary's rebuke to her was unquestionable. What should a priest with his learning and the powers of speech he had, want talking to a village girl! And it was in a complete unconsciousness of the right of any charge to be laid against herself, that she had made her censure. In a simple eagerness for life, she dissected none of her sensations. They came to her as the waves came with the inevitable tides, leaping up the strand in the rush of the storm, or lapping idly like a pulse on the still, warm days, when it seemed to her it was no more than mere breathing to be alive.

With this last state of mind she had been most familiar of all. Sensations had come leaping—sensations of anger and resentment—only when the craft of her father, his cunning and sometimes his cruelty had pricked her to revolt. With her mother she had little antagonism, unless it were at moments when her heart quested for sympathy and found none. That silent unapproachable woman with her infrequent speech that only served to hide the more her hidden thoughts, was as unapproachable to Mary as to any. A few times through her childhood, she had turned her eyes with all their intensity towards her mother, only to find that still face, paled by the black hair, and dark eyes that looked at her with some sense of pity too remote to speak itself in words.

In this way she had come to seek in herself for the little satisfactions life offers sparingly to any girl of her age.

A new frock, a new beast on the farm for her caring, the stray dog that had come to the house, a dance on the kitchen floor after the threshing with the sharp sounds of the fiddle, stinging, but pleasantly, in her ears and running in quick fires through her blood, these were the little events and happenings that marked the days for her.

But most of all the little satisfactions, deep enough sometimes to stir the sensations in her to a hidden storm, were the tales she heard at the peat fire from those wandering men who travel the roads through the length and breadth of Ireland.

Always they came to the farm looking for work they could never lay their hands to for long. When their stories were spent and the men of the house had grown weary of them, they departed. Like the tinkers on the road, they came to Kirwan's as though it were a workhouse; shelter and food for them till they were ready to set out again. So sure as one was gone, in a week or two another would be knocking at the door. James Kirwan took them in, working them for the best they would give him. For the class they were—in his computation less than the beasts he had in his shed—he treated them well enough, with food in the house sometimes and a straw bed in an empty cow-stall. Some were blind even, and these stayed only for the love of God till they were rested from their walking on the hard roads.

But each and all had their stories, and to these she had listened with a tireless eagerness since she was a little girl with bare feet and hair dropping about her shoulders.

Sitting there in the kitchen, smoking his pipe, his short upper lip protruding with an unpleasing expression as he held it between his teeth, James Kirwan would sometimes pull them up short, spitting with impatience on the floor.

"There's enough of that now!" he would exclaim. "Haven't we heard that wan before. Shure the man was

only pretendin' to be dead, the time his wife'd be goin' her nasty ways with the other fella. Begor, I'm tired of that tale. Haven't all the travellin' men got it would be comin' to these parts?"

If it drove the story-maker into a long silence, it was Mary, when they were sitting together, who coaxed him to be telling it for her ears alone. For there was a way each one of them had in telling his tales that was always different from another. The place would not be the same, or the names varied, which made a freshness to her she refused to be denied.

And then, after Father O'Connor's departure, came Father Costello, the new curate, to Ardnashiela. The very first Sunday he had come out to the farm, it was she who had weighed out the butter he took back and gave him the eggs he put loose in the pocket of his coat.

"What'll ye be doin' if they break on ye?" she had asked him.

"I'll walk," said he, "the way I'd be going to a funeral—" And they laughed, and it was a new sound to her in the house. And all the way back to Ardnashiela, he had heard it, a sound of life, in and out of the splashing of the sea.

VII

WHEN tea was laid ready on the deal table and the willow plates from the dresser set out, as Mary always set them on these occasions, James Kirwan closed the lower half of the door and busied himself bringing a chair for the priest.

The sun was shining then through the upper part of the door. A liquid blue the sky was, clean and wet, as though the storm with its floods of rain had scoured it. Beyond the fields, still in the fume of the wind, the sea clamoured with an unbroken voice on all their talking.

Griddle cakes, baked in the ashes, no hand could make better than Mrs. Kirwan's, fresh tea with the new milk still afroth on the top of the jug and a heavy-looking cake made in the house, this was the fare they had. Except for a few abrupt remarks, it was in silence they partook of it, a meal well needed after the work of the day.

The farmer ate with the evident relish of a hungry man but not so noisily in his own hearing as to prevent him from making a critical comment upon the blind man's mastication of his food.

"Blind man," said he sharply.

The sightless eyes turned from the chimney corner in the direction of the voice.

"If the Lord Archbishop of Dublin was in this room and he with the blessing of the Almighty God on the wet of his lips, I'm thinkin' 'tis not hearin' himself speak we'd be at all with the sound of ye bitin' at yeer food."

He looked round for the appreciation of laughter and

finding none, he went on with his own munching. The only sound of laughter was his own, a thin, uncertain note, which he swallowed with a draught from his cup of tea.

The next to break the silence was the blind man himself.

"I'm done!" said he, and laid his cup down with a clatter upon the hearth at his side.

Across the bare deal table, Mary looked for the first time since their challenge at Father Costello. A sensitive thought had come to her that with all his learning and the ideas he had in his mind, he must realise in the long silence that fell upon them how ignorant they were. She wanted to speak, but had nothing to say. And then the voice of the blind man, without warning or preliminary, set up above the long wash of the sea.

"There was a man at one time in Cloongarish," he began, and his voice was drawn out in the long singing note of narrative such as they have who speak the lift and fall of the songs of Ireland.

"Let ye be mindin' the wheel, blind man," said Mrs. Kirwan imperturbably, "let ye be mindin' the wheel, there's a red spark only is in the peat."

He leant down his hand in his darkness and found it. With body rising and falling then to the revolutions he made, he began again as though it were the first time of his speaking.

"There was a man one time in Cloongarish and his wife was long ailin' in her bed with a sickness she had was beatin' the minds of all the doctors would be comin' to have a look at her."

Mary put her cup aside on the table and came to the stool which was always near at hand to the bellows wheel. Seating herself there, she slipped her hand in silence over the handle and took it from the hooks of his fingers so that he could be going on with his tale without stay or hindrance. A turn of the head in her direction he gave her. There was

no blindness in it. He knew well to whom he gave his thanks, but said no word of them to interrupt his story.

"But with all her sickness," he went on, "'twas a great hunger she had on her to be eatin' the whole and more of what they'd be puttin' out for her on the bed. An' 'twas one time when it was tired of the doctors the man was, they tappin' her chest and listenin' through the hole of a tube and doin' mad things would never cure annywan of a sickness the like of what she had on her, wasn't it that time he went with himself only to an old woman had her cabin under a thorn tree up there in the hills behind Cloongarish. And it was a wild place he was comin' to that day, with the big birds wheelin' round it all times with their long cries and the mists would be comin' in great sweeps of darkness between the gaps of the hills."

He took his breath and, leaning down, he felt with his hands at the edge of the fire for a piece of peat half burnt to be lighting his pipe with. It seemed no wonder to any of them except to Father Costello that he found it in his blindness. When he had lit the crust of his tobacco he went on.

"'Twas one room of a cabin the old hag had and no chimney to it but the door and wan window only and a hole there'd be driven in the thatch of the roof. And there was herself sittin in the smoke of the peat and an old hen pickin' at the bits she'd be droppin' on the mud of the floor at her side."

Short of breath, the blind man made many pauses, conserving his strength. It was the first of these tales Father Costello had ever heard. Indeed a man might well live his whole life in Ireland and if he did not happen upon such a moment in such a place as this, would never hear them at all. He looked about him and saw the little eyes of the farmer waiting and intent upon the blind man's face. Even

the remoteness of Mrs. Kirwan was stirred to a living interest. But it was Mary most of all who arrested his impression that here he was close to the life of his people. By the set of her eyes and the light that was in them as, with face upturned, she sat there on the stool by the bellows wheel, he could see she was not of that world about them, but was wandering in any place where fancy led her.

"And what was it, blind man, the old woman told him about his wife?" asked the farmer.

"She asked him had anything happened his wife had made her sick, and he said there was nothing in his knowing. Then she asked him had anywan come to the house was a stranger to them. And when he'd thought a while, he said there was not. Then he thought a while longer and he remembered a black dog that had come straying to the place, the way it had stopped with them in the room the half of one night, eatin' all they'd be givin' it and it gone in the mornin'."

Involuntarily Mary's hand sought down to the black head of the little dog that was laid against her skirt. The movement was instinctive. It was protective too. With a swift glance her eyes had sought her father's face. It was set with his eyes upon the blind man's lips. She drew a breath and turned her own away, but something in her heart fell to a sickness as he spoke.

"Was it the black dog had brought the sickness to his wife?" he asked.

"She told him 'twas not his wife it was at all," the blind man responded, "but the body of her only and one of Them-selves out of the hills was in it. 'Twas the black dog comin' and goin' had taken her away. 'And if ye'd like to try what I'm sayin' is truth,' said she to him, 'let ye take the shells of seven eggs,' said she, 'and fill them with water,' said she, 'and carry them into the room of the house where she'd be lyin.' 'Supposin' 'tis not herself,' he asked her,

'What would I be doin' then?' 'Let ye take a fire,' said she, 'and build it up at the end of the bed,' said she, 'and when 'tis askin' why it is ye'd be lightin' it that way on the floor of the room, let ye take her up sharply with her body out of the bed and give her a pitch into the fire. 'Tis herself will fly up then with the smoke out of the roof, the way she'll be gone from ye.' "

"Did ye know this man, at all, blind man?" said the farmer, whose attention was rivetted now. So closely was he listening that his pipe had gone out and all the time there was a dark gap widening between the parting of his lips. Father Costello stared at him in an amaze. It was not so much as though he were listening to a tale or an adventure but, by the fixture of his eyes upon the blind man's face, as though he were being warned of the calamity of fate. Even in his voice there sounded the note of his apprehension as he repeated his question. "Did ye know this man yer-self?"

"As well as I'd know ye," said the blind man, "an' I sittin' here bi the fire."

"And did he do what the woman of the hills told him?" asked Mrs. Kirwan.

"He did indeed, to the word and the letter of it."

"An' what happened him at all?"

"Shure, he filled the egg-shells with water, he bringin' them into the room before her eyes, the way she'd be sittin' up in the clothes of the bed and lettin' out a laugh at him. 'Never did I see the like of that before,' she cried out at him, 'and I three hundred years in this place.' "

"Glory be to God!" murmured the farmer. "Wasn't that a terrible thing for a man to be hearin' from his own wife!"

"Yirra, didn't he know bi that," exclaimed the blind man impatiently, "'twas not his wife at all had said it. Wasn't she taken and gone from him with the black dog since the

sickness came to her, and wan of Themselves it was lyin' with her body in his bed?"

In a long silence they all received this progress of the narrative. In a long silence Father Costello looked from one to the other, seeing in their faces the fact that they had utterly forgotten his existence in the room.

That these people in the West of Ireland believed in faeries he knew well, but it was more as a belief of children he had thought of it, a wild imagination, fancying it hears faerie voices in the night of the hills, believing there are glimpses to be had of little people dancing on the faerie raths.

Travelling in Italy and France as he had done since he had left Dublin, he had greatly lost his touch with Ireland in those most impressionable years when he had come in full to appreciate the forces of life. The beauty of Rome had captured him. The history of his Church had monopolised every interest of his thoughts. The force of Christianity had swept through his being, carrying him with it beyond the thoughts of Ireland or his people at home, beyond all individualities towards the great mass of humanity. Yet here, older than St. Patrick or St. Daeclan, was a force, the force of magic, of mystery, of miracle in the common light of day which, if he had heard of it at all, he had treated with the easy scepticism of youth.

He knew it was a characteristic of his country and the Gaelic imagination still to believe in a faerie world. He had never realised as now that it was a principle of faith, more deeply seated than merely in the imagination. Resting far down in the fundamental streams of human urgency, he was finding it—those streams that dissolve into themselves the whole of mystery and, for the soul's sake must live by it.

Some years before, all the civilised world had heard and heard incredulously of an old woman being burnt to death as a witch in the mountains in Kilkenny. Listening to the

blind man's story in that kitchen room of Kirwan's farm, the priest remembered hearing of this event in his youth, the momentary horror it had brought him at the thought of the barbarity of her death, and the way in which, failing to appreciate the real meaning of it, the tale of her suffering had drifted out of his mind.

Here, in a sudden vision, without voluntarily recalling it, it came back. If these were the mysteries they lived by, might they not well be mingled with life and death? Was not that the history of every belief that had moved in the minds of men? He found himself startled into a new realisation.

The mysteries he believed in, the miracles of the Church itself, the virgin birth of Christ, the resurrection from the dead, why were these not sufficient to them as they were to him? In the fullness of their numbers there in Ardnashiela, they came to Mass every Sunday. With an intentness he had never expected, they listened to his sermons. On Saturday evenings there were many of them, but women mostly, who came to him in Confession. Yet as he listened to the blind man's story and saw their eyes drawn to the blind man's face, he came to the sudden consciousness that religion did not fill all their needs of mystery. A force that, because it was pagan was none the less real, was deeper rooted. In critical moments of their lives, it might even fling aside the charities of Christ. What mercy had there been in them when they had burnt that old woman as a witch?

"Ye'll find they're a quare lot," Father Roche had said to him when he was taking his first meal with the Parish Priest at Killanardrish soon after his arrival in Ardnashiela. "'Tis not only drink they'd be havin' in their blood, but superstition, an' I dunno wouldn't they sooner give up their pints of porter than be misbelieving the strange things they'd be seein' and hearin' in the hills."

He had accepted that statement as part of the work that

lay before him, to uproot that superstition as you root out an encroaching weed. Whenever he had heard stray talk of the faeries, he had smiled at their imagination and wished with a kindly laugh that he could see one of them himself.

But now, that evening, as he sat in Kirwan's kitchen, he found it was more than mere imagination and superstition he had to contend with. Life needed its mystery. Without a knowledge of what it could never know, life was a barren, shuddering thing to live, as lifeless as the moon. And here, in their belief of this tale to which they were listening, was tangible essence of the mystery they clung to. He felt, as he heard it, a moment of despair that the teaching of the Church could never reach down far enough to refashion the elemental motives of their being.

"And did he light his fire?" he asked the blind man with such interest as he would have kept from his voice if he could. "Did he light his fire as the old woman told him?"

"Who's that is speaking?" asked the blind man querulously. "Who's after askin' me?"

They told him who had spoken and bade him go on with his tale.

"Ah, shure, why would I be tellin' it," he cried out in a louder voice, "and he laughin' in the sleeves of his black coat would be fallin' over the shafts of his hands?"

"I'm not laughing at all, blind man," said Father Costello. He did not say he would have given much to laugh. "'Tis not laughing at a word of it I am."

Still he hesitated and then an ungoverned and volcanic wrath fumed up red in the farmer's face.

"Blast ye—get on with the tale!" he shouted, and spat on the ground at his feet and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

The blind man was bent with his fear of the farmer's anger. It might well indeed be for the love of God they

took him beneath their roof, but the wrath of man was not far distant. He started tremblingly again, till slowly his voice settled down to the swaying tone of his narrative.

"He lit his fire," said he. "At the foot of the bed he lit it with sticks he had broken from an elder tree would be growin' outside the house. And when it was in the flame of its heat and she askin' him why was he lightin' it at all, didn't he take her up in his hands and with the pitch he gave, he flung her into the heart of it."

"Was it gone she was from him then?" whispered Mary.

"'Twas a great belch of smoke out of the fire there was," said the blind man, "the way it 'ud be risin' out of the roof and the time he was lookin' around with the sting of the smoke in his eyes, wasn't he there alone in that room with the sticks burnin' and the bed empty on him?"

"Glory bè!" exclaimed the farmer. "That was a fearful way for a man to be losin' his wife surely."

"There's some maybe wouldn't mind what way it was," said Mrs. Kirwan slowly.

It was Mary who asked him was it lost she was entirely. The blind man shook his head.

"'Twas himself told me," said he, "and the woman of his house sittin' there bi the side of him, she not knowin' the half of wan word he'd be sayin' or the truth would be comin' out of his mouth."

"What way did he get her back so?"

He lit his pipe again.

"It was lonesome he was in his house," he continued, "with his wife gone from him, and when three months were by without sight or trace of her, he went to the old woman in the hills askin' her was there no way for him to be gettin' his wife back from Them at all. 'Next time of a fresh moon,' said she, 'when there's a fine point on the hook of it, let ye go down to the cross of the roads is beyond Cloon-

garish. And take the coil of a rope,' said she—'and make a wide loop in it. 'Tis there ye'll see her and she goin' by with a company of Them. And call out her name,' said she, 'in a loud pitch of yer voice and the time she's lookin' back at ye over the turn of her shoulders, let ye cast the rope with the loop of it round her neck and 'tis then ye'll have her cot from Them that time.'"

Again he paused for his breathing and they spoke no more to him then, but waited in quietness for him to tell his tale as it came.

"Ten days he had to be waitin'," he went on, "till the moon was fresh. Then he took the coil of the rope and the wide loop he had made in it and went out one time in the mouth of the night to the cross of the roads above Cloongarish. And it was waitin' there some time he was before he heard the crack of a little drum and the music of pipes in the tilt of the wind."

Now the blind man lowered his voice to the fall of a whisper almost, and with his mouth agape, the farmer leaned forward on his chair.

"'Twas a whole crowd of Them came by that time," he said, and the words he spoke were in his throat rather than upon his tongue. "And some were on the backs of black horses and some on their two feet walkin'. Men and women there were and some of them were tall as the tallest man ye'd see shtandin' in the fair at Ballina. And there in the mix of Them was herself goin', an' she laughin' in a quare lift of her voice and he knew her bi the walk she had and the way she'd be tossin' her head at the laugh. It was 'Norah!' he cried out then, the way he'd be callin' her name three times in that dark place. And at the third time she looked round over her back at him. 'Twas then he threw the coil of rope he had in his hand, the way the loop there was in it made a ring in the air and fell down on her shoulders. Then

he pulled with all the power he had in his arms and 'twas that way he got her back from Them and shure they never troubled herself again. And that's my story."

He fell at once to silence when he had done, reaching down again to the fire's edge for a piece of glowing peat and for the third time lighting his pipe. James Kirwan stood to his feet and knocked out the ashes of his own that was cold into the flat palm of his hand.

They were not awed. Their silence was only that as of people who had heard bad news; something that might well happen to themselves at any time; something inevitable almost, like news of death which none of them, when it came their way, could escape.

"What man was it?" asked the farmer presently. "Did ye hear his name at all?"

Feeling by the wall behind him, the blind man rose to his feet.

"'Twas Shawn Geoghan was his name," said he, "an' 'tis not the darkness is on me would stay me knowin' him anny place bi the lisp he had on his tongue."

He took up the stick that was in the corner of the hearth beside him and sensing his direction shrewdly by the walls, he made his way to the door and went out into the sunlight of the yard.

VIII

THEY remained there, much in the same attitudes as when they had been listening to his story. Only the farmer had moved at its ending and he still stood where he had risen to his feet, still knocking the charred tobacco out of his pipe into the palm of his hand.

"That was a quare wan," he said under his breath. He said it over two or three times and then, announcing that he was going across to the fields to see whether the rain had done any damage to his corn, he turned and went out. He left the lower half of the door open. Chickens came to the threshold and stood looking into the room with eyes inquisitive for food and foolish sideward jerks of the head. They made querulous noises, at the sound of which Mrs. Kirwan picked up the rushes in her lap and came out of her place by the fire.

"Is there corn is in the bin?" she asked.

Mary nodded her head. She had no thought to determine why her mother was proposing to do the work she usually did herself. She had no wish, evident to herself, to stop her. Through the open door into the yard, she let her go without question and in the dream that had come to her, she moved to where the blind man had been sitting. It was as though she felt the fire could best respond to her thoughts and she wanted to be nearer to it.

The movement of Father Costello standing up to his feet and putting back his chair by the deal table had no sound in it to attract her attention. She stared at the red glow of the peat, then, more to herself than to him, she said,

"Isn't it a strange world where things would be happening the like of that and people with no more power to be stoppin' them than the rain and it fallin' or the sea would be washin' up into the land."

Even with Father Costello, his mind seemed to be in the toil of nebulous but entangling thoughts from which he was impotent to escape. With an effort, he shook the sensation from him.

"'Tis all nonsense and idle talk," he exclaimed, with warmth, "this wild chatter of foolish tales. 'Tis a shame there ought to be in your mind, Mary Kirwan, a young girl of these times with the good sense you'd have in you from the schools, believin' the gossip stories of an old blind man. Isn't it bad pride he'd have in himself the way you'd all be listenin' to him?"

At first she looked up in an astonishment. Then, rising out of her place by the fire, she stood up to her full height when her eyes came well to meet his own.

"Weren't ye listenin' yeerself?" said she in a steady voice, for it was a priest she was talking to and she was not yet forgetting it, even with the pulse that had started in her throat.

"I was listening," said he, "the way anny man might be listening to a foolish tale would be told while people would be idling their time around a fire."

"Idling!" She had that word clipped with her tongue out of his sentence. There was a hint of mimicry in her voice as she said it. "Shure 'tis not idling we'd be in this place, Father," said she, "the way they'd be in the grand houses of the towns or the streets of the great cities of the world where ye'd be passin' yeer time."

He made no pause to consider why she had taken a personal resentment to what he had said. All that concerned him was that she had not understood. Instead of urging him

to an apology of explanation, it roused his anger to think of the obstacles in his way.

"Whether you're idling or whether you're working," he flung at her, "what good is it to be believin' the mad trash of those tales are invented by one man or another while they'd be going about! 'Tis not things like that the Church 'ud be teachin' you and 'tis a shame, I say, for a girl with all the beauty you'd have in your mind to be taking any notice of them at all."

She heard him say she had beauty in her mind. Above the sound of his anger he heard himself say it too. It was to linger with her afterwards. Now she thrust it out of all hearing.

"'Twas not invented it was," she cried out at him. "Didn't he give the name of the man, and wasn't it speakin' with himself he was, had the tale from his own lips?"

"You believe all that we heard?" muttered Father Costello, as though till that moment he had not truly reckoned upon her absolute acceptance of the blind man's tale. "You believe 'twas the faeries themselves were in the body of his wife lying there in his bed—you believe—"

"There's every word I believe!" she retorted defiantly, "and if 'tis comin' here to the house ye are," she went on with words that rushed without thought in a hot haste from her, "and ye thinkin' 'tis all the grand ideas of the world ye can be puttin' into our heads, 'tis sooner not seein' the door open to ye I'd be at all!"

He went straight over to the barrel churn in the far corner of the room where he had left his hat and took it quickly in his hand. He knew he was acting upon emotional impulse, but could not prevent himself. For the moment he was distantly conscious of forgetting he was a priest. The man in him, chagrined at his failure to reach down deep enough with his faith into her mind, was uppermost. He wanted to

get away, quickly, out into brighter sunlight, to come down to the shore of the strand where the waves were rushing in the abating fret of the storm. He wanted to feel the wind on his face. He knew he could not regain himself from the sting with which her words had smitten him while he was there alone with her in that room. Yet to go, as he was doing, was only to prove how much he had felt them. The mental predicament in which he found himself exasperated him. He could have called out across the room at her that he wished to God he had never come out to the farm at all, that they had never been together in the hay-field, that he had never talked to her as he had done.

Yet outwardly, except for the quick impulse of his movements, he betrayed none of the impetuous temper of his mind. She saw she had incensed him. She saw no more. He was going because she had been rude, ill-bred, the mere farm girl that she was. Of a sudden there was a hot stinging in her eyes. If she could, she too would have called out to him that she had not meant what she said about his never coming there to the farm again. But would he understand that? He was a priest. How had such a situation as this arisen in which she wanted to say she was sorry as though she were talking to an ordinary man? She found herself suddenly full of emotion, fluttering with it like a bird beating its wings in a snare. And it was a priest, who had angered and then smitten her with remorse, a man of God, vowed to his Church, so far out of her reach or wish that she wondered in an amazement at herself how it had come to such touch with him as this.

The door was still open as Mrs. Kirwan had left it. He put his hat on his head as he crossed the threshold. She saw him, black, unrelieved, like a painted mass against the blue sky over the sea. The next moment the sun lit him up as he stepped out on to the cobbled path and was gone.

Perhaps it was for a while because she thought he would return that she stood waiting. She told herself she was only a farmer's daughter, bold and ignorant, and he was a priest, had great learning and should be kind to her for her ways. Perhaps because she could not actually believe he had gone, she stood where he had left her, staring at the open doorway. Her eyes met and were opposed by the blue of the sky over the roofs of the farm buildings. It was a hard sky now, metallic and resisting. The hope in her that he would come back became blunted against it. She ran to the door and looked out. He was crossing the fields down to the strand. There was a quickness in his walking and she felt no thought in him to return. He was gone and maybe it was never, as she had said, the door would be opening to him again.

Her lip was quivering as she drew herself with a sudden weariness back into the room. She had lost something of which it seemed she had never really appreciated the value until then. Having gone, she no longer thought of Father Costello's intolerance to her belief in the blind man's story. It was the times by the peat fire and that long evening in the hay-field she remembered, when he had brought her the sight of a world outside her own and ways of life that had given her a new pride in herself.

A desolateness with the chill and volume of deep waters swept over her. She felt herself thrown back, drifting, like one whose hands had come near the grasping of a rock from which a wave had swept them just when they were catching hold.

At one moment she was wishing he had never come to Ardnashiela, at another that he had never come out to the farm, never talked so specially as it seemed he had to her, but had left her alone with such contentment as she had had.

Then she knew she had never been contented. And then for those last three months that she had had a joy and a pride

in herself greater than she had ever known before. The days had lost the smallness of their monotony. They had appeared in a wonder to her and had brought with them the belief there was something almost wonderful in herself.

Last of all, there leapt up in her memory what he had said in the heat of his words that surely were too swift for idleness. She was a girl, he had said of her, with beauty in her mind.

The exhilaration that brought her had the greater pain now that she realised he was gone. It came back into her mind as blood returns into unaccustomed veins, rushing, burning, excruciating.

A cry came out of her lips, dumbly and involuntarily as an animal cries. But there were no tears.

IX

AS Mary had seen, Father Costello walked quickly through the fields down to the strand. He walked quickly with his thoughts at his heels but could not escape them. The fresh wind on the shore, heavy still with salted spray, scattered them about but in the momentary lullings of it, they came shouting, crowding back.

In that kitchen at the farm, he had forgotten he was a priest. All the inspiring visions he had seen in Rome, all the enrapturing history of his Church and the uplifting permanence of his faith had slipped from him in a moment unawares. When he took up his hat from the barrel churn and strode out of the door into the sunlight, eager to get away, he had been stripped of his cloth to the mere habiliments of a man.

How had it happened? It was too late then to go back and say he had not meant to go, that there was nothing but an impulsive folly in his behaviour, that he was her priest, chiding her for foolish superstitions it was his duty as a man of God to root out of her mind.

Not only would such an action ring untrue, but it was too late to make it even appear convincing. She must have seen him as then, in the sharp edge of the wind, he saw himself. Time only would blunt the impression he must have given. In a month, maybe, or less, if he went back to the farm, she would have forgotten the exact manner in which he had left her. The priest that for the moment had deserted him, he could insinuate again with subtle suggestion and impress with a delicate insistence upon her mind.

"What is it?" he suddenly called out aloud to himself into the noise of the wind. "What's happened you? Are you acting the priest of God?"

A terror came to him then. He quickened his steps as though it were some physical thing he could avoid. In a vivid poignancy of sight, bereft of the hallucinations of his calling, he saw himself as an impostor, aping Christ, making a mock of his faith.

Coming into the Main Street of Ardnashiela from the termination of the strand in the sandstone rocks, he quickened his pace to the doors of the little church. Entering, he closed them behind him and went up the aisle and into the chancel and fell upon his knees on the steps of the altar.

He prayed—but he found he was praying like a man offering the material substance rather than the exaltation of his thoughts to God.

X

THE blind man's story lingered not only in the memory of Mary and Father Costello, but in James Kirwan's as well. Going out of the house to see what the storm had done to his crops, he continued muttering his remark all the way to the barley fields.

"That was a quare wan," he said and every time he announced that opinion to himself, his mind centered upon the black dog that had appeared to Shawn Geoghan in Cloongarish.

The barley was swept down in broad patches across the fields, for the straw was long. It lay prostrate as though a machine had passed over it, beating down the transparent gold into hammered sheets of metal. He looked at it, but scarcely saw the damage that had been done. He was thinking of the black dog that had appeared to Shawn Geoghan. From this it was not a long turn for his mind to take to the little black dog that had found its way straying to the farm and been claimed for companionship by Mary. No ill fortune had certainly come to them since its appearance. The cows had given good milk. The crops were better than he remembered for some years. If the rain had beaten down the barley, a lot of it might rise again. Without doubt it was rain they had wanted to fill out the corn in the last weeks of ripening. He had said with truth it was worth silver pieces to him.

But the mind of James Kirwan was of that nature which is never contented with events as they pass. Suspicion ruled in him. As Father Roche had said, he asked every year for

the corners of his fields to be sprinkled with holy water. The old man had been shrewd enough to see the composition of the farmer's mind in that request.

"'Tis not the blessin' of God, ye want at all," he had said, "but a fend for the evil might be comin' to yeer crops and I'll not do it."

Kirwan's oaths to the contrary had not persuaded him. He had not done it. Alert with suspicion the farmer had expected each year that some misfortune would befall him. But nothing had happened that could not be accounted for by natural means. For all his complaints, he had had good years. Beyond doubt, he was the most prosperous man in Ardnashiela. If he whined in his talk about his failures, there was no one believed in them. Yet they were substantial enough to him, for if they had not happened as yet, he was always secretly suspicious that they would.

At the appearance of the black dog, he had driven it off the farm with a stick, shouting at it down the road with the spleen of his class and race for a beast that was not his own. It was when she found it still lingering near the yard, pitiable in need of food, that Mary took it into the cow-shed and gave it a bone.

A hungry dog has no reserve of gratitude when it is fed. With its eyes and that seeking pressure of its nose into Mary's hand, it found its way precipitately into her heart. She gave it her confidence. Here was a friend to listen to the most secret of her thoughts. With the loneliness there was for her in the house that meant no little. She had fought stoutly with her father to assert her right to keep it. When he found that the sudden high pitched tempest of his voice and the fury that sprang flashing in ugly lights into his little eyes was of no avail to break her unlooked-for determination, he as suddenly subsided. A chilled word from his

wife out of the chimney corner secured his reluctant consent.

"Ah, shure, let her be havin' her little dog," said Mrs. Kirwan, and then she had added enigmatically, "there's some might be glad of a dog would be comin' to them."

Mary had thanked her mother with a glance and James Kirwan, having tried the flashes of his temper and failed, said no more. He went sulkily out of the kitchen and slammed the door.

From that day the dog had been brought into the house. Having no doubt from the first as to whom it owed allegiance, it followed Mary closely. Whenever they had a meal, it sat touching her legs and taking whatever she gave it with a tacit understanding between them that it was best to make no fuss even of gratitude. Sometimes when it came sniffing to her knees and looking up with enquiring eyes, Mrs. Kirwan gave it the recognition of a hand that patted its head without warmth. The farmer himself it avoided with a sure remembrance of the first day it had been driven from the house. Whenever he came into the kitchen it crept the nearer to Mary's skirts. If she was not there, it retired close to the wall beneath the deal table. And the more fear and the more suspicion it showed of him, the more James Kirwan mistrusted and resented its existence about the place.

If Mary was not there to restrain him and it came within his reach, he often kicked the little beast as it went by. The fact that it gave out no cry to the blow increased rather than softened his dislike of it. He was annoyed by its lack of response. He felt he wanted to kick it until it did acknowledge the infliction of pain.

Then the story of the blind man had seemed to reveal to the hasty suspicions of his mind what it was he hated in that black creature with the cringing body it always dis-

played to him and the furtive eye that followed him with as watchful a distrust as his own.

Where had it come from, that black dog? No one knew. Hoping to get rid of it, he had enquired one day in Casey's public house in Ardnashiela. No one claimed it. The increasing consciousness of these circumstances played like freshening winds through his thoughts, fanning them to a flame. And there he stood at the edge of his barley field, letting the fiery tongues of suspicion and fear leap up one after another, slowly consuming the peace of his mind.

He came back to the house through the grass fields where two months before they had cut the hay. Even in that short while the aftermath looked greener for the rain. He noticed nothing. Deep in his thoughts there was a purpose fixed. His small eyes narrowed to a mere cunning look as he thought upon its execution.

What was a dog after all? It ate its food and slept about on the floor, but it brought nothing to the house. He exaggerated in his mind how much food it did eat. It was a useless, cringing beast. What a fool that man in Cloongarish had been, not taking a red hot turf out of the fire and throwing it at the black dog that had come to him. He would have had little trouble with Themselves if he had done that. Wasn't he a fool himself to be chasing the dog down the road with a stick? If They had not wreaked their vengeance upon him yet, surely They were bound to do it soon.

Drops of sweat pricked out upon his upper lip at the thought of the things that might happen to him. And with every thought a new fear came, creeping with it into his mind. What should he do if the dog had disappeared before he got back? It was in a moment, in the turn of an eye they were gone sometimes. Might it not have Mary taken already with the foolish affection she had for it? And what

would he be doing if, like the woman in Cloongarish, she came to her bed in a long sickness with himself having to pay a girl or a man maybe to be doing her work?

Expediency threaded a recurring purpose through his fears. At one moment he was debating how he might kill the black dog—if indeed the hand of man could destroy it—the next he was calculating in pounds, shillings and pence what the loss of Mary's labour would mean to him. He was in a fume and a sweat by the time he got back to the house. But it was not his cunning that deserted him.

His wife and the blind man were alone in the kitchen. The dark was falling. He could see them faintly by the light of the peat. On the hearth, close by the fire, lay the dog, a shapeless form, its nose curled into its body, asleep. It growled when he entered, lifting its head and staring at him with quickened eyes that were glittering and black in that half-light.

"One of these days," said Kirwan, "that beast'll make a good dog keepin' the house. Shure if he growls at meself won't he be barkin' the deuce and all at a strange man or woman, the way we'll have no more tinkers come thievin' about the place?"

With the nerve of his cunning he walked across to it and patted its head.

"Good dog," he muttered. "Good dog," and they knew, neither of them, the shuddering he had as his hand touched it or the fear in his mind that if he looked away, it would be gone before he could look back again.

It surely seemed as he stared at it that it must know well what was in his mind. He detected a fresh fear, not of blows, in the furtive glance of its eye. Yet it was not fear that it appeared to be to him but a sharpness of wits whereby it might escape him even then.

With all the crude invention of his cunning, he began

talking of the rabbits he had seen in the barley field where the corn was broken down by the rain.

"If that dog was good at the fetchin'," said he, "wouldn't he be a good beast now for a man to be havin' on a farm?" He reached for his gun over the chimney and with a simulated carelessness in all his movements, broke it and looked through its barrels into the fire.

Mary was not there. A need for haste was spurring him lest she should come back. No less a need for casual deliberation was warning him against any unnatural display of speed. As he dropped some cartridges into his pocket, Mary's absence had a sudden seeming of strangeness to the ready suspicion of his mind in that state of fear.

"Where's herself?" he asked.

"Gone into her bedroom."

"What for?"

"'Twas like she was sickening. Shure, I could get no word out of her at all."

If he had any doubt of the matter as he came down from the barley field, there was none in him now. He looked down at the dog with fear and anger and distrust sharpening the quick lights in his little eyes.

"Where's the father to be puttin' his blessin' on the house?" said he.

"He's gone back to Ardnashiela."

Distressed with his apprehensions, the farmer swallowed in his throat. Even circumstance was full of threatening. With an overwhelming conviction, he felt that nothing in that place would be right with him until the dog was killed. It shivered and shrank from his hand when he patted its head again. To the softest blandishments of his voice, it seemed to wither into itself.

"Let ye come along with me," he said coaxingly, "and we'll see quickly is there any sport in ye at all."

He slipped the gun under his arm and dragged the dog to its feet. Whatever fear he had, he was mastering it with the determination to rid himself of its cause. Days afterwards he knew there would be a wonder in him that he could do what he was doing then.

In a still voice that had meaning in the very absence of its expression, Mrs. Kirwan asked him why he was making a fool of himself, dragging that dog out to be hunting rabbits.

"Isn't it wastin' yeer time ye are," she said calmly, "and the dog struck with a fright of ye?"

In all their life together, James Kirwan had scarcely been aware of his wife; he certainly had never been sure of her. He was in no mood to be sure of any one then. The remoteness in her voice from the fear he was suffering whipped up the froth of his anger.

"What the hell's that to ye?" he shouted. "Shure the dog's been fed in the house. Isn't there right he should earn the food he'd be havin'?"

He was afraid now of his own anger betraying him. He wanted to get out of the room before he said any more. With a piece of cord he had in his pocket, he made a noose and slipped it round the dog's neck, dragging it across the floor to the door. Mrs. Kirwan watched him with a quiet comprehension in her eyes, but made no movement to hinder or stay his going. The blind man sat listening to the resisting claws scratching against the mud floor as the wretched creature was dragged away.

"If she wants to know where is it at all, shall I tell Mary ye've gone out shootin' rabbits with the dog?" she asked. Her lips and eyes were inscrutable. It was impossible to say whether she was smiling or not.

"Ye can tell her any damned thing!" he shouted back and he slammed the door as he went out.

The blind man fell to turning the bellows wheel. By the

light of the thin flames that licked about the peat, Mrs. Kirwan bent over the plaiting of the rushes in her lap. There was a fulness in the silence when the farmer had gone. It was as though the spirit of his intentions and his fears had remained, lingering on like echoes imprisoned in a cave. Sitting there by the fire they listened to them.

"'Tis no dog to be catchin' rabbits," said the blind man presently.

"It is not," said she.

"'Tis a dog is trained ye'd be wantin', with eyes is sharp and a quick scent to it."

"It is indeed."

"Shure that dog had no scent."

"It had not. "

"Didn't I feel the coat it had and 't isn't the darkness is in me eyes would hinder me knowin' 'twas no dog to be chasin' a hare or anny runnin' thing at all."

He waited for an answer to that as though their voices had become a pendulum swinging to and fro and then he said,

"That dog'll be gettin' in the way of the gun maybe, the time he lets off with it."

"That's what it'll be doin'," she replied.

There the pendulum of their voices ceased its swinging and it was at this moment, Mary came into the room. The blind man paused turning the wheel. Lifting the milk white of his eyes, he stared across the fire at Mrs. Kirwan as though he might see whether she were going to tell what had happened.

She said nothing. Her head was bent. She did not look up when Mary came across to them. Her entrance into the room had welded the silence rather than broken it. It was the heavier with her presence. And then, as though it had been what they were waiting for, her voice shattered it with

a sharp note, asking where was her dog. With a fresh energy the blind man turned to his wheel. Mrs. Kirwan looked up, meeting the gaze of Mary's enquiry with eyes that had no light of information in them.

"'Tis gone out with himself it is," she replied.

"What for?"

"Shootin' rabbits."

"Shootin'!"

That was a word that hit on her ears like the sudden blow striking upon a gong. It rang and reverberated through every sense in her. If her heart had been sick with her thoughts of Father Costello as she lay on the bed in her room, it was near to vomiting now.

With a cry she could not contain in her lips, she ran to the door.

"Which way has he gone?" she cried out and struggled with the latch her fingers were too eager to undo.

"'Twas to the barley fields he said," replied Mrs. Kirwan imperturbably.

Mary's foot slipped on the sill of the door. She fell with a cry, half of anger, half of fear, such as an animal makes when it falls in pursuit. Her body had speed in it even before she had recovered to her feet.

There was a drift of cloud low down on the horizon, still lit to a reflected fire of orange from the sun long set behind the headland. She seemed to disappear into it and was gone.

The farmer's wife laid down the rush bag she had just finished at her side. Cutting some slices of tobacco from a roll of plug, the blind man churned it round and round in the palms of his hands.

"There's no soul would be in a dog," said he, "an' 'tis not a quick death would be anny harm to it."

XI

THERE was a faint chrome light about the fields. All that was darker than the sky was smudged without edges in deep masses of brown. Even the broken lines of the loose stone walls were soft as velvet against the land. Catching that mellow light there was in the air, the sea looked like a sheet of heavy steel brushed with a thin wash of gold.

Scarcely able to see the places for her feet as she ran, Mary sensed her way, familiar with every field and every gap in the broken walls. She went in a direct line to the barley field, making no distance to gain the passage of a gate. The loose stones fell as she scrambled over the walls. More than once she fell herself. A pressing fear sped her to quick recoveries. Little cries of her voice came soon with the shortness of her breath. It might have been a score of miles and always she knew she would be too late.

There was never an instant of doubt in her mind as to what her father had meant when he went out shooting rabbits. The dog would not have followed him. He must have dragged it there, and to the barley field, the farthest corner of their land. If never once during the telling of the blind man's story his eyes had turned to the little creature that lay against her skirt, she had divined his thoughts—perhaps before they had any birth in his own consciousness.

Every moment as she ran she was listening. Beyond the heavy sounds of her own breathing, her hearing was straining out through the yellow twilight for the report of a gun.

Until that had reached her ears she pressed a hope against her heart to keep it from bursting.

A potato field of some few acres lay before her. The earth was sodden with the rain. It clung and gathered and clogged her feet with lead. Her cries were heavy now—a stifled moan with every breath. There was that field only to cross. The barley field lay beyond. She was stumbling more than running now. Her body was bent and over the furrows it swayed and reeled with the motion of a drunken man.

It was not only the strain upon her strength, the heaviness of the ground fettering her feet, or the distance she had to go. Fear was poisoning her endurance whilst all the time it urged her on. At one moment she was struggling surely and then in an instant every motion was arrested. Her limbs refused her. Lot's wife turned to the pillar of salt could not have stood more still than she.

There broke through that quietness of evening the report of a gun, a violent shattering sound, and then another that followed swiftly after it. After that, the stillness was full of death about her. She was past the sound of a cry from her lips, of any audible or visible sign of what she felt. While there was hope, she could struggle on, giving voice to her fears. The reports of that gun over there in the barley field had ended then. It was not fear she felt now but a sickness as at the sight of blood and the nauseating horror of the violence of death.

Presently her limbs began to move again, carrying her unconsciously towards the barley field as though, so deeply impressed had been her will upon their motion, that now, when all voluntary effort in her was dead, they acted automatically in a mechanical reflex.

She reached the stone wall, conscious for the first time in her wonder how she had come there. Dragging her body

up by the steps of the projecting stones, she looked over the top. For one moment she swayed. It was not for balance. The next instant she was scrambling over the stones, one scream after another rushing wildly through her lips in a dementia of anger, horror and revolt.

Down in a dip of the ground, at the edge of the swaying corn, on the unploughed headland of the field, her father was standing, beating with the butt end of his gun a writhing black mass that twisted and turned spasmodically at his feet. With every blow, he was grunting in his breath. With every evasion of the death he was seeking to give, he muttered curses and spat the name of God and the Virgin in supplication out of his mouth. It was the life it seemed to cling to that terrified him. Having missed the wretched beast entirely with his first shot and wounded it but slightly with the second, he had taken to the butt of his gun in an agony of fear that had deprived him of every instinct of pity. The fury of his impatience was not to put the dog out of its pain. He was killing it to save himself from his own terror. One blow after another was wild and missed its mark. The more desperate he grew, the more uncertain was his aim. He was breaking every bone in its trembling body, but the blow that would have stilled it, in the frenzy of his mind, was beyond the power of his delivery.

At the piercing sounds of Mary's voice, he looked up. It was no more than a swift glance. He saw the impetuous rush of her coming, the demented figure she looked in the uncertainty of that deepening twilight. The shawl she wore over her head had fallen loose. One end of it was a black stream behind her. Her hair was scattered and fell about her face. In that glance he could see the dark gap of her open mouth as she screamed. All the time he had known this would happen. From the moment he had left the door of the house, with his wife's parting enquiry in his ears, he

had been sure in his mind that it would happen before the end.

Mingling with his fear of the dog, a fear of Mary herself had found its way without his knowing it into his blood. After that one quick glance up the field, he redoubled his blows as though he thought that even then she might save the life of that twitching mass of flesh at his feet. If there was a madness in her at the sight of what he was doing, there was no less a madness in him to be doing it.

By the time she reached him and had thrown the whole impetuous weight of herself against his body and flung him back, the wretched beast was lying inert and lifeless beneath that last shower of blows.

He laughed when he saw it still at last. It was high-pitched laughter, the departing shout of his fears as they left him. The black dog was dead. Death was a sure remedy. It would fret him no more with its slinking ways about the house. When he laughed a second time, it was high in the nature of his voice, but lower than before. The temper of his confidence was returning to him. He became fully aware then of Mary clinging to him as he stood, of her breath, beating and sobbing against his chest, of her arms binding his with convulsive clutchings and fingers that tore at the sleeves of his coat.

He pushed her away. She stumbled and fell to the ground, lying in a disordered heap with her body heaving for its breath and her heart filling her breast and her throat with its beating. She had not looked at that quivering thing again. Her first thought had been to lock his arms, to break the force of even one more blow before it fell. It had been beyond her to think of a greater mercy and let him end it all.

But when he laughed, she knew it was over then. She was too late as she had thought she would be. It was his

laughter more than the shaking free of his body and the thrusting her off with his arms that had flung her away. There was no wish or power in her to stand and face him then.

He looked at the stock of his gun that was a dull red with the grease of blood. Stooping down, he wiped it amongst the couch grass growing high at the foot of the wall. Then he looked at her.

"Get up to yer feet, Mary," he said with no voice of compassion. "Didn't I tell ye at all times I didn't want that bloody black dog in the house? 'Tis meat dead it is now an' shure, what's the heavin' is on ye? Get up, I'm sayin'!" He lifted her with his foot but she clung in a passion of revolt to the earth she was lying on.

He opened the breach of his gun and took out the empty cartridges, dropping them on the ground and turning away from her with contempt that came easily now that his fears were gone.

"Ye'll be a damn fool of a girrl," he called back over his shoulder, "if ye stay lyin' there in the fallin' dew. Isn't it a good thing I've done for yeerself this night with Them-selves sendin' that black beast to be takin' ye away an' it lyin' there now where death 'ud have it all the days of time?"

He paused a moment to see if she would respond to that. She did not move more than the lifting and falling of her body against the earth. He climbed the wall and left her there. She could do as she wished. It was certainly not her company he wanted to be walking back to the house with him; nevertheless there lingered a fear in him that even with that thing dead by the side of her there might be harm coming to her somehow. Whatever it was, it was not strong enough to detain him. He walked away across the potato field and faded into the full darkness of night that was coming up from the sea.

For a long stretch of time she lay where he had left her. Slowly then the course of her thoughts came back into the steadying flow of her mind. And most of all, it was the words she had said to Father Costello that repeated themselves again and again like a measure throbbing in her brain.

"Isn't it a strange world where things 'ud be happenin' the like of that and people with no more power to be stoppin' them than the rain and it fallin' and the sea would be washin' up into the land."

For all this time, she had not dared to look at what she knew was beside her. It was not courage that came to her at last but her fear that turned into the slower channels of her mind. With the sensation of a chill wind blowing gently across her forehead and about her lips, she raised herself and stretched out her hand that trembled as it touched the softness of fur. Without thinking, for the thought could scarcely have come to her, a rush of pity pressed her hand on its body. Then she cried out again. She could feel the broken bones and the lifeless pulp that it was.

PART II

I

JOE FENNEL, that for some time had had little fortune with his fishing, sat on the sea wall mending his nets. A group of men and women were gathered there, chattering as rooks do that gather from habit in a certain tree. At their feet, in the street of Ardnashiela, a broad, open space there where the sea-wall terminates it and rises in solid masonry to protect the village from the encroaching sea, a cluster of children sprawled and wriggled in the dust. With their skirts and their shirts, their pink legs and their brown, red faces, they were like a swarm of coloured insects, crawling over each other in a blindness of busy purpose.

It was a hot and cloudless day at the end of that month of August. Faint emerald and misted blue, the sea lay behind them, a sheeted, enamelled setting to the dark hair and coloured shawls of the women and the soft, broad-brimmed hats of the men. Their outlines were cut upon it with the edges of flint.

There was a foreign look in the picture it made to the eyes of Father Costello as he came down the street of the village to climb the cliff path for his morning walk round the open headlands. The dark rocks slipped down into the still shimmer of the sea. Drifts of light in washes of liquid pearl dissolved the far line of it into the sky. There was no beginning of it—no end. It hung there in faint suspense, a coloured web of water and air behind them. With all their talk and their laughter they stood out sharp against his eye.

He waited a moment to look at them, thinking how near to the nature of the earth they were, as though they might have been lizards basking in the sun. When he realised they had become aware of his watching them, he waved his hand. It was as if it were to children he waved it.

"Good morning, all of ye!" he called out.

"Good morning, Father," they called back. "Good morning! Good morning!" Not a voice that did not respond to his salutation.

He turned away up the road of the solid rock, past the fishermen's cottages and took the cliff path winding out through the gorse and heather to the headlands. Their response lingered like a chant in his ears till the music of it, growing fainter and fainter, was lost in the silences over the glassy sea. He sat down on a ledge of rock where the sea pinks cushioned with their wiry roots in the crevices. Three hundred feet the cliff descended in jutting balconies to the lapping water below. About his head, circling and sweeping downwards in sheer descents, the gulls sped, crying their notes of joy and breaking the light with the scythe of their wings.

There was no real tide of happiness in him or he would have seen all this in the penetration of its beauty. He knew it was there; but as he sat looking over the sea it was as though he were in a shadow with the sun falling beyond. Ever since that evening at Kirwan's farm his mind had been in the shade of life. The thought of what he had done fretted him. It fretted him still more that for three weeks he had not been near the house. Most of all it fretted him to feel a need in every thought, dragging him there against his will. Wet or fine those days, he had turned against the way of the strand and sought the headlands and the open air to read his breviary. More often than was his wont he prayed. They were prayers as he had offered them that

day in the chapel, solid, material distractions for his mind—poor substitutes for the quick impulse of spirit.

It seemed almost at times there was a sickness upon him. Yet he had laughed at himself when for a moment he had thought of driving in the nine miles to Doonvarna to see a doctor. What could a doctor do that he could not accomplish with his own will! Courage came and went from him like running water. His purpose swayed in a balance of insecurity. He wanted to destroy the impression he had left upon Mary Kirwan and feared to do it lest, in the attempt, he were to prove himself still more a man.

He had realised the loneliness of Ardnashiela when first he came there, but it was nothing to the loneliness he felt then, as he sat on that ledge of rock, with the sea birds wheeling and crying in the air and the water melting with a mist of heat into the sky.

They sat on the sea wall discussing him long after his black figure was out of sight round the first headland. Shrewd comparisons with a coarseness of truth they made between him and his predecessor. He stood as it were in the centre of their life there in that corner of the world. They listened to his sermons. They asked his advice. They confessed their sins to him. There was not a woman amongst them, had not admitted him into secrets of her mind that were sealed to the rest of the world.

"I'd sooner be goin' confessin' a murder to himself," said one of them, "than I would tellin' the tattle of a tale to Father Roche in Killanardrish."

Remembering a sin of thought she had felt constrained to confess to him, there was another to agree heartily to that.

"I'd sooner be makin' a sin in meself than not goin' to him at all," said a third, whose reputation entitled her to

the shout of laughter with which they all greeted this admission.

It was talk like this they were making amongst themselves, close to the nature of the earth, as Father Costello had seen them. If there was a coarseness in it, there was a simpleness too. Where they touched life they were like children talking in wonder of a mysterious game the rules of which were beyond their administration.

Most of those who sat there were fishermen and their wives, mending their tackle or waiting in idleness with eyes turned often to the sea, watching for the signs they read the water by. At the very end of the wall, close to Fennel himself, there was an old man sitting. He had spoken no word that morning. His hands placed one upon another were leaning on a blackthorn stick that supported the drooping weight of his shoulders. The lower part of his body was resting on the stones. With the shrewd reserve of old people, he had just been listening to their talking. At last, in a pause of their laughter and joking, he said in the thin pipe of his voice that Father Costello was unlike any man he had seen who was a priest.

When they asked him why and his lips first played with his answer, they waited because he was an old man and had seen long years of the world. Presently he said,

"There's a look in his eyes doesn't belong to him."

They asked him was it the way he meant he was a man was not true to himself and he said it was not that way he meant it at all.

"For a man can be true in himself, surely," he said, "and there be other things in him he'd know nothing about."

He let them have silence with themselves for a while, thinking over what he had meant by his words. But he knew there was not one of them had understanding because the women fidgetted with their hands at their shawls and in

their hair and the men in the silence were spitting on the ground. Fennel only, who had not looked up at any time, was bent down over the work at his nets.

With a smile then that had a wistfulness in it because he was sorry for them, the old man began telling them the tale of a man who lived where he was fishing in his youth in the islands off the West of Galway.

They edged their bodies along the wall to be nearer to him because it was a story they understood better than any saying of words at all. The women pressed close together, leaning forward to watch his face, while two men got up from the place where they were sitting and squatted on a pile of ropes at his feet to be looking at him. And it was just this attention he wanted to be telling this tale. He was a very old man and there was vanity in him to think he could gather them about him.

This man, he said, had the same look in his face as Father Costello. He had never seen it in any other man but one. Married the man was, with two children. His wife was a clumsy, dirty woman, so that every one wondered in the place why had he married her at all. All the same, he spoke well of her to his neighbours and said if it was dirty she was, she made no more trouble in the house but what they would be clearing up after her.

"But 'twas easy seen," the old man told them, "it was not contented in himself he was. He stood fairly by her, however, and would listen to no one saying a word against her. But there was the look was always in his eyes."

He shifted the hold of his stick while he looked at them all to see if there were any more straying in their minds from his tale. All round he looked and when he saw all eyes watching him but Fennel's, he went on.

"It was one night he was picking weed off the shore after a storm. He wanted it to lay for manure on the little

patch of land he had. 'Twas that time he saw a woman in the water where it was clear and deep over a spread of sand at the foot of the rocks. She was singin' to him and her voice was like water runnin' over the lips of the stones into a pool. 'Twas then he went out into the water, leavin' the weed he'd gathered in a heap, till he came to her. She put her arms that were like smooth peeled branches round his neck, and they were cold, he said, with the sea and the salt that was on them. Then he went away with her that night out into the sea where she called him. 'Twas himself was gone that time from his wife and the children he had for three years. And when he came back, the look was taken out of his eyes he had that didn't belong to him. He was just like anny man ye'd see out on the roads. But in two months' time, wasn't he dirty the way she was herself? The last time I passed his house," the old man concluded, "the thatch was broken on it and the water droppin' in through a hole in the roof and the ducks scrabblin' their beaks in the pool it 'ud be makin' on the floor."

For the first time since the story had been begun, Fennel looked up from his nets.

"Was it more contented he was in himself after that?" he asked.

The old man wiped a drip from his nose with the back of his hand.

"There's no man is contented," said he, "has lost a part of himself, even if it never belonged to him. Wasn't it goin' often to the shore after that time he was and 'twas not for the need he was lookin'. Hadn't they sold the bit of land he had while he was away to be keepin' the house and there was nothin' was his but the few stones would be in front of his door."

"It was one of Themselves had him taken," said the

woman still remembering the sin of her mind. "Isn't it all ways and all times They'd be comin' to ye? 'Tis little differ there'd be whether they took what was belongin' to ye or what was not. Isn't it yeerself must go with them?"

Fennel finished the last tear he was mending where a dog fish had bitten through the hemp. With a deftness that looked strange to his fingers, he tautened the knot on the rope.

"'Tis those have great qualities," said he, "and those have no content with themselves would be troubled always. I never heard of one yet was easy in their mind had that sort of trouble at all."

They all talked this way after the old man's story and there was no more laughter amongst them. The woman with the bad reputation who had lost her man and lived alone in a cabin on the Doonvarna Road, sat pulling at her hands and listening.

"'Tis those have no content," said she, "would be worse troubled."

They had no laughter for her at that, for it was not her bad living she was thinking of, but the dark nights when she was alone with the long road outside her door and the curlews crying through the storms over the peat bogs.

Fennel stood up to hang out his nets and it was then he saw Mary Kirwan coming towards Ardnashiela by the way of the strand.

II

MANY times since the death of her dog, Mary had remembered the reproaches of Father Costello. If her father had believed, as he believed, it would never have happened. This had set her wondering and distressed her with doubt. Was he right after all? Was it a harmful thing to believe in the trouble the faeries could bring to those who opposed them? It had seemed harmful enough in this. But what of the man in Cloongarish and all the stories she had heard by the peat fires? There must be something to explain. Without that faith, what was there left to believe when all these things were happening in the world? It was not God if He had mercy who could let them be.

Always at the end of these searchings, she found herself clinging to her faith to make life possible. What was left her? Without it the whole world became void and desolate like the peat bogs below the black hills of Doon. For surely it was better for those dreary spaces to be the haunt of the spirits of evil than with the cries and the sounds they heard and the lights they saw moving across them to say nothing was there at all but the coming and going of God.

"Yirra, what would the Almighty God be wantin' Himself in the wild drifts of a peat bog?" she asked herself, "an' He sittin' all the days of the year in a bright place in the golden vaults of Heaven."

Yet these very questionings had smitten her conscience the more when she thought of the way she had spoken to

the priest and the bold, ill manners she had had. Never for a moment had it seemed to her, as it had to him, that he had lost the dignity and the quality of his calling.

It was a proud way he had gone across to the churn and taken up his hat. There was something in his silence when he went out of the house that made her feel shame, hot in her cheeks, whenever she thought about it. And she had thought of little else in those three weeks of his absence from the farm. For what hurt in her most of all was the loss of his company and that pride she had in herself when he was talking to her.

She had spoken the hope in the words of her prayers at night that he might come back again. But he had not come. Again and again she had made excuses to go into Ardnashiela in the hope of seeing him in the street or walking, maybe, on the strand. She had not found him.

Only at Mass had she seen him, when his robes and his office and the chanting of his voice made him seem further away from her even then by his absence. Once, in the first moments of her remorse, she had thought of going to confession, of admitting the faults of her boldness to himself, a priest of the Church. He would see by that she was sorry for what she had said. It would not be hard for him to absolve her from that. In a childlike simplicity, she saw him pronouncing forgiveness and thereby making it possible for him to come out to the farm again and talk to her once more as though nothing had happened.

But when she beheld him officiating at Mass that scheme—and it was more of a scheme than true penitence—lost all its potency. It was not that way she would get near enough to him to restore the pride he had given her. The wide gulf of the Church was between them. She felt the existence of it like the sea. Coming home along the

strand, she looked out into the Atlantic and told herself that it was distances such as that which were between them and never realised that in the very consciousness of that distance she was already rousing her heart to span it.

With all the fatality there was about her, shadowing in her eyes, reflecting itself in the paleness of her face and that slight drooping that was about her lips, Mary Kirwan was alike in the simple ingenuousness of her mind to all those children of Nature living on the desolation of that coast. She acted upon her unbidden and unchallenged impulses. Her thoughts were no more than sensations rising to the surface of speech, muttered often in her breath.

The fatality that she had was outside and remote from her psychology. Had it in any sense been composed in the fabric of her mind, Father Costello would doubtless have found in her no more than the farmer's daughter, finer in looks than most of that class, but a crude, coarse nature, designed for no better than the earthiness of the soil she lived on.

It was not so he had discovered her. With the old song-maker, he too had seen that presence of fate drawing her beyond the world that she might walk her own ways of life. She must in some sense have felt it too, yet it had never entered into the capacity of the conscious mind of any of them. Only the wandering song-maker from Connemara had seen it and he, in the uprush of inspiration, unable doubtless to trace the thought from which it came.

And there was even more to it than this. That fatality was not confined in her being. It drew others with it. It had drawn Costello, the priest. It had drawn Fennel, the fisherman. All who saw it in her, felt the dragging eddies of it about them. Since she had grown into the woman she was, there had been others, but they had kept

away. They feared the issue perhaps and sought the quieter streams of life.

These two men were of that fibre that Fate involves in her ravellings. The simple credulity of the one, the eager, hungry enquiring of the other, they were bound, without knowledge of what was happening to them, to be drawn into the fate of Mary Kirwan.

With some men as it is with some women, Fate impetuously concerns herself. They must live out as it were to a fixed purpose of Destiny from which there is no turning either to right or left. With their own wills even they contribute to the ultimate issue as though something, inscrutable in the affairs of life yet inevitable to their progress, has essentially to be achieved.

In all history, sometimes far-reaching enough to be seen, sometimes remaining inscrutable through all the long ranges of time, these men and these women are to be found effecting the hidden purposes. Fate marks them. There is a look in their eyes, a fatal sense about them. Whenever they wander over the wide acres, they are to be recognised, though few may know them.

If Fennel had never come into shelter from the storm, if Father Costello had never been sent by the Bishop to Ardnashiela, the destiny of Mary Kirwan would not have been altered.

It was not the seed of David fate needed to yield its fruit in the Son of Man, but a woman, and with that same look doubtless in her eyes that had branded her for suffering.

That morning, as it had been with all the others, Father Costello was not to be seen in the street of Ardnashiela. Her eyes ranged everywhere, to every open doorway, to the steps of the chapel itself, looking for a sight of him. She

might have believed, had she not seen him at Mass, that he had left the village altogether.

In John Foley's store—the one shop in Ardnashiela—she heard a woman speaking of him and it was her heart it seemed as well as her senses that stopped to listen. She wondered then for a moment what it was that had happened to her to feel as she did. But never did her mind approach the subtle analysis of introspection. The simple answer to all her questions came back again and again, always in the same way. He was a priest. If he had brought honour to herself and that pride she felt when he talked to her, wasn't it a grand thing for any girl of her like to be having? It was more than Julia Mahon had, or any of the girls she knew. Didn't they hear him from the pulpit only and for all they might say, it was not the same as himself talking to her alone in the hay-fields when all the workers had gone into the house and the little finches were flying without fear so still they'd be standing together. That was her pride; that he talked to her at all. But she kept it locked in her and never boasted of it to any one.

There was no abatement to her expectancy. The moment she came out into the light of the street from that dingily illuminated shop that smelt of tallow and dried goods, of linen and woollen things that had been stored for many months, her eyes searched quickly up and down. On fine days such as that, all those who had an idle hour collected by the sea wall. There was no sight of Father Costello. Only one man was in the street. He crossed from the other side to meet her. It was Joe Fennel.

For three weeks she had forgotten all about him, the promise she had made, even the advice that Father Costello had given her. As he crossed the road to speak to her, it all came back to her with the noise of Fate in it.

Perhaps it was because of what Father Costello had said,

planting the idea already to seed in hidden ways in her mind. She made no reckoning of that. All she knew, as Fennel approached her and escape became impossible, was that here was the man her life would be mated with were she to walk a thousand miles from that place to be free.

He shifted his hat as he came. It was a gesture, half salute as of the hand to the forelock, half in a poor imitation of the way he had seen young men lift their hats to girls in the streets of Doonvarna.

"I saw ye come along from the strand into the street," said he.

She told him she came there often to Foley's for the things they'd be wanting in the house.

"I've seen ye," he admitted. "Anny time I've not been out in the boat, I've seen ye, but I wouldn't bother ye speakin' till it was a day as fine as the like of this."

She looked at the sky about them as though questioning it for what he meant by that. The little deception served no purpose.

When he saw that glance of her head, he reckoned it was natural enough she had forgotten her promise. She was not for him, though the fate there was in it pressed him on. If he knew little hope, he knew no discouragement.

With stilted, awkward sentences he reminded her of that afternoon in the cow-sheds—the storm—their talking together and the promise she had made.

"This is the first real fine day we've had," said he. "It isn't meself would be botherin' ye to keep it till then."

She could easily have said they wanted her at home, that she had not told them she would be out for long, that there was work in the farm she must be doing. There were countless excuses she could have made to the unexpectedness of his reminder. But there was a friendliness about

him, clear there in his face, a stability of reserve too that made her feel she could talk to him, somewhat as she had talked to her dog. Like her dog, she was aware of an honest dumbness about him in which the most sacred confessions of her thoughts would lie buried for all time if not forgotten. She could even ask him about Father Costello—if he knew why the priest had not been out to the house for these three weeks, and it would mean nothing to him. There would be less suspicion in him than there was in herself. It seemed, as she looked at him there before her, waiting for her answer, it would frighten her less to be speaking to him than aloud to herself as she often did when she was alone and the sensations she had came to words, like bubbles rising to the upper surfaces of her mind.

It was nothing more than a sensation now that she could trust him which rose in her when she said she would keep her promise.

He stood, bewildered with the sudden fortune of life, watching her as she went back into Foley's shop to leave her parcels till she returned.

All the way down to the boat cove, he walked like one who sets his stride to a tune that is in the air about him. For her sake as well as his own, he avoided passing the sea-wall because of the laughter they would all make and the jests they would throw after them to see him going out on the water with a young woman.

It was alone, as it would always be, that he wanted her. If his life had been lonely, he needed no more than herself to fill it, sitting with him by the fire and eating their food together. If any sexual thought came to him about her, it frightened him, as it frightened him always to be taking the communion at High Mass. He shuddered often when the wafer was put upon his tongue lest his teeth should

break it. He trembled when he thought of her lying close to him through the whole, long darkness of night.

He felt as though he could lift the boat in his arms to launch it. She stood on the rocks waiting until he brought it over to her in the deeper water. He was standing knee deep in the sea as he helped her in. The first touch of her hand perhaps meant nothing to him, there was a subtlety in her for it to have meaning. She realised the simple power in the coarse grain and the grip of his fingers. But once seeing her there before him, as he leant and pulled on the stroke of his oars, was like a harbour coming after the long darkness of a storm.

"'Tis a quare thing," he said presently, when they had passed the first low headland and the roofs of Ardnashiela were hidden beyond the cliffs, "'tis a quare thing ye livin' always in the noise of the sea an' yeerself never goin' out anny time on the water."

"Shure, I never had anny man to be askin' me."

She sat as still as one of those wooden figure heads that carry the bow-sprits of the sailing ships upon their shoulders. He smiled to see how still she sat.

"There's no fear. Ye can move in the boat," he told her. "'Tis not tossin' her about ye'll be, the way the waves have her sometimes."

"Isn't it terrible when the waves are big like they'd be breakin' on the strand in a storm?"

It was not in his nature to think he could impress her or any one with boasting.

"It's like as if the hands of the Almighty God had got hold of ye," he said simply, "the way they'd be tossin' ye like a straw would be cot in the rushes of the wind."

"Aren't ye afraid?"

He answered straightly that he was not.

"But shure death's a lonely thing," she insisted, "when

'tis only the cold of the waters 'ud be over ye, and no priest to be sayin' the last words would bring a resting to yeer soul."

Scarcely dipping his oars, he sat wondering for a while how she could think like that with the sea about them as still as the face of glass and the sun hot upon it so that the boat moved through a quivering air, with the water lapping against the gunwales like the low whistling of a bird.

Presently he raised his oars out of the water, resting on them and looking at her, so that at first she met his eyes and then, because of the meaning there was in them, turned her own away. For a while they were like this with the sea in a shimmering silence round them and the cliffs in a warm glow, smudged with light against the sky. She had never felt herself so far away from the world before and tried to centre her mind, looking at the water that was dripping in globes of pearl from the blades of his oars. The sea took them and melted them into itself. It was all a liquid pearl.

She was not afraid of him, even though they were so far from the land and the world seemed misted away from her till she could believe it was possible for her never to come back to it. He was so simple a man that, though she had had her premonition when they had met in the street, it was not in any sense that he would master her fate. She had seen herself mated to him rather as things happen than as a strong hand brings them about. She had not even supposed he thought so much of her as to need her. Men amused themselves with women. Often the girls in Ardnashiela were taken out in the boats by the fishermen. She had heard their cries of laughter on Sundays across the water of the bay. From the hysterical sound of it she had never wished to be one of them.

Fennel there with her was not the kind to tease a woman. No doubt it was that which Father Costello had meant when he had said he was the only man it would be well for her to go with. He must have seen what she saw that morning. He must have known what lay before her. How had he known it?

But she believed it was a long distance from her yet. There was a certain comfort in the security she felt that, with the man Joe Fennel was, she could keep it from her as long as she chose. Too little experience she had or not enough shrewdness of observation perhaps, to realise the emotions running strong and deep in the slow but certain heart of her companion.

This is the man a woman trusts and she was trusting herself with him.

It was as though a storm had suddenly risen, beating up the water of that quiet sea into the waves he had said were like the hands of God, when he leaned forward on his seat so that his face came close to hers and he said—

“Mary—”

It was all upon her then and when least she had expected it. She looked up, startled, as though she had heard a voice calling her name from the shore.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’m wantin’ ye,” he replied. “I’m a lonely man and I’m wantin’ ye.”

She stared away to the cliffs as though there were help for her there and her eyes found and fixed themselves upon a black speck, motionless, like a fly settled and clinging to the far-off face of the world.

III

THERE were two ideas, joining simultaneously to the same issue, in Mary's thoughts. In a sudden and unexpected moment life had swiftly closed upon her. She wanted to escape. All sense of her security had vanished upon an instant. It was not Fennel she was afraid of. There was no thought in her that he had taken advantage of her being alone there with him in the boat. Her loneliness and defencelessness were not of his contriving. With a feminine sense of that which lay beyond the region of her intelligence, she knew him to be an instrument merely. She would have believed him had he told her he had thought he would never speak of the thing that was in his heart to say.

It was from the unseen hand wielding the sword that she was shrinking. In a swift glance of premonition she had seen it that morning. Now it was beating the air with its song, loud and penetrating, in her ears. Below his breath almost, with the intensity of his emotions, Fennel had spoken out his heart in a simple phrase, "I'm a lonely man and I'm wantin' ye."

There could scarcely have been plainer speech for her to hear than that; yet the tone of his voice might have been stentorian. It struck like a hammer, beating a blow upon her heart. In the simplicity of his words, it was as though she heard him saying, "I want to take ye out of yeer dreams and the great pride that was comin' to ye. 'Tis the weight of life I want to be puttin' on ye, the way ye'll be liftin' yeer head no more to be listenin' to grand talk.

Isn't it like all the rest of the women ye are and what would they be doin' but scrubbin' the floor and mindin' the childer and boilin' the food? What else would they be doin' but that and no joy to 'em all the days of time as long as water runs?" This was all that was conscious to her.

She wanted to escape from him then before she heard any more. With that thought quickened to importunate impulse, she had turned her eyes, searching to the cliffs, a warm mist of colour in the heat and light. And then the sight of that black speck, clung motionless to the face of the rocks, had doubled her impulse to an uncontrollable desire.

It was Father Costello. Without any knowledge of his movements or the habits of his time, she knew it was no one else. Instinct informed her of it with a convincing voice. Then she thought if only she could be free of where she was and out there on the cliffs, she could find him as for all these weeks she had been seeking to do. If only she could speak to him in the quietness of any place, as they had been quiet and alone in the hay-field, she could make him realise her penitence for the boldness of her speech that day. Her heart was crying to be free, yet in a kindness of some deep sense of pity she had for the fisherman, she knew she must soften the disappointment to him.

She felt her whole body trembling with the urgent demand of purpose as she turned back again to face him. He was looking down at the bottom of the boat between the gap of his knees. It was as though, having made his confession, he was afraid to look at her lest he should know her answer too soon.

When she spoke, he looked up. All he saw in her face was fear when he had expected revolt, repulsion, contempt—anything but that.

"Why didn't ye tell me this before we came out?" she asked, making the ease of time.

"I didn't know I should have the face to be sayin' it at all," he admitted—and she believed every word of that. He had destroyed none of the trust she felt in him.

"'Twas ye talkin' of the lonesomeness of death for those would be drowned in the sea," he went on, "and the little soft sound ye had in yeer voice and the kindness was in yeer eyes made the feelin' I have about ye come up in the turn of the words. I didn't bring ye out alone in the boat the way I could be tellin' ye that. But 'tis said now."

She looked away with a softness of moisture in her eyes.

"I wish ye hadn't said it," she muttered.

"Why so?"

"'Tis not married I want to be at all."

"Why not?"

"Shure, I dunno! 'Tis hard and bitter that life would be for a woman. Isn't it left she is in the course of a little piece with a man and he lookin' at her the way he'd be lookin' at a dog has worn its feet on the roads."

He appeared at the moment to be unable to say anything to that. Either she would take or refuse him, this was all he had thought. It had never occurred to him a woman could think of marriage as a condition that would alter her life one way or another, unless it were with a man she disliked, or one who would beat her and treat her ill. There were many who submitted without complaint even to that.

Did she think for a moment it was that way he would be treating her once he had got her for his own? So well he knew the tenderness he had for her that in his astonishment at the thought, the question had slipped into words almost before his wish to speak it.

"D'ye think I'll treat ye badly?" he asked her, and it

was with a gentleness of voice that smote her as she heard it. "D'ye think I'm that kind of a man would raise his hand to woman to be beatin' her?"

She could not answer this. He was making her way harder than she had thought.

"Is it the way ye think I'm like a many of them," he went on, "would be huntin' under the stones maybe if they couldn't get money to be drinkin' it?"

She could only shake her head. She was learning and too fast for her ease of mind, what Father Costello had meant when he said the fisherman was a true man. Why then was she still longing in her heart to be away, to hear no more of what he was saying? Another girl, such as Julia Mahon, would be simpering with delight to hear a man say what he was saying to her there. Yet every word stung with the pain of it.

He bent forward, leaning on the handles of his oars. His voice was muffled when he spoke. She might have been the painted figure of the Virgin on the altar table above him and he, with too little knowledge of womenkind, stammering a prayer to reach her hearing.

"I'm not that sort at all," he said in a murmur, almost to himself. "Isn't it a plain man I am, but thare's great kindness I'd have for one would be destroyin' the lonesomeness is on me. There is indeed." He looked straight to her then. "And 'tis yeerself could do that, Mary Kirwan, with yeer soft voice is not like the women in Ardnashiela would be bringin' a great noise of shoutin' about the house."

She had not accepted him; but she had not refused. He believed he need say no more than this to convince her. That a girl should not want to marry was little more than words to him. Men and women married because inevitably and invariably it happened so. With some girls it was not even a question of whom they chose. Even that seemed

natural and reasonable enough to him. They changed one home for another as cattle moved from this farm to that. It was a matter of treaty and bargain—of common consent.

Marriage was only a part of life. He had never had any other view of it. Living there in Ardnashiela, as they live in all the West of Ireland, there had never been any possibility that he should. What more could he say than he had said?

Often enough when he sat on the sea wall with the other men they had teased him with their laughter and their jests because he had no wife to be fretting him. Perhaps he was different from them. If the women they had made a fret of their days, it was all as a part of life they took it. A man could forget a great deal when he had a little drink taken. If there were words or a fight even he would be having with his wife, wasn't there little was left to remember of it in the morning?

So they all lived in Ardnashiela—all but he. Until he had met Mary Kirwan, he had preferred the loneliness of his peat fire, the door shut against the face of night and the voices of his fellow men, with the long silences that fell upon his mind as he smoked his pipe and waited for the call of sleep.

He preferred it no longer now. Since his lobster pots had been taken from him and he had felt the tormenting presence of the unseen making Their sport of him, he had come to fear those long silences, that door shut close and the empty room. It was fear like a child's fear. It was loneliness, like a child's. That kindness of life was what he wanted about him. He never spoke to her of love, or thought she had any need of it. Yet he loved her even then, as some men do love women for the gentleness they can bring into a hard life that has little of the tenderness of affection to soften it.

"Can't ye be givin' me the word?" he asked, looking up at her.

Without the quality of comparison, she thought of her dog, the way it lifted its eyes to her, as when she had found it starving in the yard of the farm, gratitude already there mingled with expectancy.

"It's all so quick," she said, afraid in every word to hurt him. "How did I know ye were goin' to be talkin' to me like this? It's too quick it is. Shure I'd want time to be thinkin' of it in me mind." She sped her glance again to the cliffs. The black speck was still there, still motionless, but upon the surface only. Any moment it might be gone.

"I'll say no more then," said he. "Can't I wait? Shure, I can indeed. If the nights are long, won't I be thinkin' always 'tis yeerself is comin' to shorten them to the break of the day and that'll be a grand thought for me to be havin' surely."

It was because she knew that this was how it would end that she cried out to him to stop.

"I have not said I would," she told him, and it was as though there were some one else there and she was answering them. "Shure, I've given ye no word one way or another. 'Tis not married I'm wantin' to be this time or anny. Aren't there plenty of women would be goin' the time of their days without a man at all to be naming them?"

It was this talk he could not understand from her. Not understanding it, perhaps it frightened him even more than if she had given him her direct refusal. Life was as long in Ardnashiela as elsewhere and maybe when a year or two had gone by, he might take her with patience. But this avoidance of marriage itself, the very strangeness of it to his hearing raised up a barrier he had no quickness of intelligence to circumvent.

Drawing a deep breath in which there was despair of

his impotence, he took up his oars again. With a mechanical stroke that brought its sense to Mary of an engine incapable of fatigue, he began pulling the boat out further into the luminous mist of the sea. The sound of the oars in the wooden rowlocks fell rhythmically upon her ears with the fatal regularity of a ticking clock. She saw the cliffs receding from them, the world her heart was crying for drawing further away. In a very little while she felt she could bear the sound of those relentless oars no longer. With an impulsive gesture, sped to distraction, she leant forward and clutched at his hands that wielded them.

"Don't go out any more!" she whispered to him. She was almost beyond subterfuge with the passionate fear that she was a prisoner now. "Don't go out any more! Let ye be puttin' the boat across to the cliffs over. I'll be walkin' the way back to Ardnashiela. Shure, I'd sooner be walkin' back."

He stared at her, a bewildered man. Every moment he was understanding her less; every moment she was escaping from him the more with her elusiveness; every moment he was fearing his first thought of her, that it was not a man with the nets and the boat he had and the money was put by in his house who would ever be calling her his own.

"What's on ye?" he asked querulously. With any satisfaction to his reason, he could only think it was an illness she felt, as many of the girls did when first they came out in the boats. Yet the sea was marble smooth. The mark of his oars lay far into the distance behind them with circles that widened in scintillating rings of light.

She simply stared at him as though she could give no meaning for what she had done. He asked her again, when she could only repeat:

"I'd sooner be walkin' back." Then, as if this were

a tangible reason that would give him understanding, she added: "It looks so far the land 'ud be out here."

"Yirra, I'll pull her in so, nearer to the rocks," said he.

What could she say? Her mind was searching for an excuse, feverishly snatching at one thought to persuade him and as feverishly putting it away.

The real issue had singled itself out in her now. She knew it was to see and speak to the priest she wanted more than any desire to be away from Fennel in the boat. Her fear of not being able to accomplish it, had risen higher now than the fear she had of the thought itself. She was not stopping to ask herself what it meant in the purpose of her heart. To achieve her object and before it was too late, was then the only idea that dominated her.

"But I want to be walkin' back," she reiterated in a pain of distress. "I want to be alone to think about what ye've been sayin' to me. It isn't sittin' here with ye in the boat I could have a thought of it at all. Won't ye put me out on the rocks," she pleaded, "the way I can be walkin' with meself only and a long quiet I'd be havin' in me mind."

Without knowing it, she had tuned her voice to its gentlest note with her pleading. It sped through unexpected channels of emotion into his heart. He felt it beating with fear as that night when he had seen the flocking birds. There was nothing he would not have done for her—no sacrifice he would not have made. If it was a disappointment and a loss to him and spoilt the most wonderful hour he had ever known in his life, it was for her and in response to her wishes he was spoiling it. He had seldom talked to women at any time. Never in his life had he talked to one in such closeness of mind as he had to her. It was wonderful enough to him that he had said so much. She knew the secret desire in him. When they had set out from the boat cove, he had never hoped he would reach

so far with her as that. If this were indeed the end of it, it had been wonderful while it lasted.

Without another word, he put the boat about and, with a quicker stroke, since it was her he was serving, he sped them over the blue water, through the mist of light and the quivering air to the silent feet of the rocks.

Sitting there in the stern, a still figure once again, it was as though she measured the decreasing distance with her pulses; as though she were coming with heart leaping to an enchanted land.

IV

HIGH away there on his ledge of rock, Father Costello had seen all that had happened. For a long while, having read his Breviary, he had sat with eyes sometimes half closed, letting his mind drift with dreams and visions in the light and the heat and the still shimmer of the sea.

In a pilgrimage of thought, he wandered back to look upon his first enthusiasms in Rome. There they were in a clear retrospect like a painted picture. How were they now? Had the colour faded? Were the outlines less keen? He gazed over the glassy stretches of the sea, contemplating his memories as he might have gazed into a mirror, recalling the look he had when he was young, setting it beside the reflection he saw and asking himself how life had treated him.

They were all there, those enthusiasms. There was not one he missed. Nevertheless it was not joy but something of fear and disappointment he felt in finding them. As lofty they were as ever they had been, yet something there was in them seemed different. For a long while he regarded them, gazing into the years as they had passed him by, much as a man, sitting in a high window, watches the passage of a pageant in the street below. One costumed figure after another came and went, whose characters with every power of discrimination, he failed to reconcile. This that should have been a man for broils and skirmishes and all the rough adventures of war, was dressed as a scholar, pale of face and hollow-eyed. Here, one that was a knight-at-

arms had cast his vizor for a monk's cowl and there the cardinal that had been was become a humble abbot's clerk.

At last, in a vivid instant of introspection, he saw what it was. His enthusiasms had become ideals. A greater haze of beauty there was about them than there had ever been before, but they were more elusive to his touch. The strenuous vitality had gone out of them. They had become spiritualised. He felt he could no longer walk with them as once he had done, conspicuously in the open streets of life. All were there, but they dwelt in the inner sanctuary of his soul. He knew them no longer as the common blood, pulsing in a common measure through every vein in his body. He could not laugh about them now, as he had once, with a free laughter. They were more sacred and yet the very silent sanctuary in which they sheltered now, seemed less secure than the open, noisy, light of day.

What had happened that it had become like this? It was beyond a human possibility he could openly and fearlessly face the answer to such a question as that. An unflinching courage had been needed in him to reach even so far in self-admission as this.

It was just life had done it, he told himself. He was seven years older since those days in Rome. If it was ideals they had become, whatever they were, he thanked God for them. Even Father Roche perhaps had set out with such enthusiasms as he. And what had life done to him? It had turned those enthusiasms into mere dross of habit. He felt he had no need to pray that such might never happen to him. He knew well it could not. Without these ideals, the mere thought of life was abhorrent to him. That was something to be thankful for; a girdle to wear, a staff to hold that would help him over the longest journey.

He was beginning to drive himself to courage because he felt he needed it. More than that, he was finding it fast.

Ideals were better than enthusiasms. There was not one of the latter but what life in the end did not wear it down. Enthusiasm was like the breath in the body of a man running a race. In time it was like to give out. It always gave out before the end.

It was not true that the silent sanctuary of a man's soul was insecure keeping for his ideals. Where else should they abide? And how could life touch them there?

And now he was feeling a new joy in his heart that he had faced this relentless enquiring of his reason. It seemed to him he had been like a man upon his trial, confronting the pitilessness of his accusers. With frailty and insecurity of purpose they had charged him. Now he had answered the charge. It might be true that he had lost the vital quality of his enthusiasms. But what if he had! In place of them he had found the spiritual quality of his ideals and locked them in the safe-keeping of his soul where the hand of life could never touch them.

In the end he had laughed, a short laugh of contempt at his fears and then in a moment the silence everywhere, that had lent itself to his thoughts, was broken. The seagulls were still wheeling with sharp cries over the cliffs; there was a long humming note over the heather, but from a continuous hearing this had woven itself through his mind to a tangible thread of silence. The sound of oars beating rhythmically in the rowlocks of a boat had snapped it. In an instant the sounds of nature all came back to him. He heard the humming note over the sea-pinks and the heather. He heard the cries of the sweeping gulls, the faint lapping of the water on the rocks below, but thrusting above these came the noise of oars to bring a human interest of life into the solitude.

In a few moments the black speck of the boat rounded the sharp edge of the headland, with a trail of glittering ripples

behind it like a water spider on a still pool, except that it moved with an almost imperceptible gliding.

Almost glad of the interruption at that issue of his thoughts, he had hoped for the moment it was the men come out to their fishing. Not even the people who had lived in Ardnashiela all their lives ever lost interest when the fish were in the bay. There was an excitement, a sense of adventure in the air those days. It had not been long before Father Costello had caught the fever of it too. Boats were hurried out from the boat cove, nets were gathered up with hasty hands from the sea wall. Every one about the street and in the houses could be heard saying to each other: "The fish are in the bay—the fish are in the bay." They brought the commotion of life with them. All Ardnashiela started up from the peacefulness of its sleep and for the rest of that day there was a coming and going of men and women, of children running and donkey butts rattling over the stones.

The moment the boat came in sight, Father Costello knew there was nothing like this to turn that solitude into the fret and flurry of life. It was Fennel, he thought, the only industrious man amongst them, come out to look after his lobster pots.

So seldom had he seen women out in the boats that at first, at that distance, he had assumed both those figures were men. It was only when they came across the straight line of his vision, that he began to have a doubt of it. There was a certain timidity with which she sat in the stern of the boat that arrested his eyes, watching them. No man would sit like that—no man bred to the life of the sea. It was a woman. In itself that was enough to prick his mind to speculation. It was a woman and already he had thought it was Fennel coming out there to inspect his pots.

His mind swept back to the remembrance of that evening

in the cow-shed, the last words of Fennel as he had gone out, the thoughts that had come to him about the fisherman then.

It was Mary Kirwán.

She had kept her promise. She had taken his advice. So uncommon an event was it in Ardnashiela for any girl on a week-day to go out with the men in the boats, that he came without hesitation to the certainty of belief. If on a Sunday they went out, it was more in the nature of an excursion—a crowd of them singing sometimes, laughing always in high-pitched voices. He had never seen a man alone with a woman before. The very sight of it had all the significance of a wooing. Not only was she keeping her promise with Fennel; she was taking his advice.

His eyes became rivetted upon them. There was not a movement that escaped him. When Fennel rested on his oars and leant forward speaking to her as she sat there in the stern of the boat, it seemed he could hear the deep note of earnestness in his voice. After this discovery, so rapt had his attention become that he did not realise the meaning of a wish, flinging itself through his mind, that he might have a glass to be watching them more closely. He speculated for a reason to explain to himself why they were drifting. They must be talking seriously then. Perhaps in those very moments, out there in the silence of the sea, Fennel was talking of love to her.

What sort of talk would it be from a man like that? Honest and true, he imagined it, but with a heaviness that would hang, weighted upon his words. Would it lift her to an exaltation? Hearing his declaration of it, would she rise to a flame of passion as high even as when in so many words she had turned him from the house and in a flame of passion, too, shaming the priest in him, he had left her?

He watched her with his eyes, as a hawk watches, all that time while Fennel was resting on his oars. She made no movement. She did not respond. He was quick to realise there was no sign of exaltation there. Then close upon that realisation came an urging wish in his heart that there might be.

Once he thought he saw her turn. He believed he saw her face, pale, even against the glint of the sea, looking towards the cliffs. Had she seen him in that moment? How was it possible? At such a distance he would be lost to her eyes, part of the pattern only in the fretted patchwork of the rocks. It was impossible for him to know the effect to them of the sun striking upon his black cloth. The more he gazed at them, the further away, losing substance in the mist, they appeared to be.

But there, surely, if ever he had seen one, was a man at his wooing. Presently would he take her in his arms? Did those people make love with open demonstrations of their passion? If he did, was it right that he should be looking at them? Could he bear to look? Love was a sacred thing—but was it—a sacred thing to them? From the young men and women he had often seen caressing each other in public places, he did not imagine it could be. Yet he felt that if Fennel were to lean forward then and take her in his arms, he must shut his eyes and turn away.

Why was that? There had been no marriage service since he had come to Ardnashiela, but he knew in the nature of those people and the regard the men had for their womenfolk, that love and passion were mere transitory and inconsiderable states of mind with them. Why should he shut his eyes? Some man, some time or another, would touch her lips with his. Some time or another a man would take her away alone to himself. Yet she had said she never wanted to be married. What had she meant

by that? Surely it could not be just the look in a woman's face that made her so different from her class.

Nevertheless, she was different. At all times there was something impossible to know about her. He had felt it himself. He confessed it freely. That interest, he was ready to admit it then, had drawn him often out to Kirwan's farm. There was a latent, tragic sense about her. She would not easily find a joy in life. Yet there was not one amongst all those people in Ardnashiela who seemed to need that joy so much as she. Perhaps she knew that in herself. Perhaps that was why she had said she would never marry. Perhaps, too, that was why he was watching them so closely then, why he wished that she might be lifted to a height of exaltation, why he knew in his heart that one of the rough fibre of Fennel, the fisherman, could never carry her there.

Presently Fennel had taken up his oars again. They were going further out to sea. On and away into the dazzling mist of the light they were moving. Soon they would be a blurred speck upon the water when it would be impossible for him to see even the rhythmic movement of the fisherman's arms, or the bright splashings of the oars. A wish cried out in him that they would come closer to the shore. Had she seen him? Was it from the watching of his eyes they were drawing away?

As though it were in some telepathic answer to his question, some miraculous response to his wish, he saw Mary lean forward and touch Fennel's hands upon the oars. For a moment he thought it had come, the lifting of exaltation, the instant before, when, dropping his oars, he would take her in his arms. There was an arid heat in his eyes. But he did not close them. He had not turned away as he supposed he would. He was looking with all the searching

power of vision, as if every sense he had were leant to the sole purpose in his mind.

But it was not what he thought. For a while they appeared to be talking, then Fennel turned the boat and with quicker strokes that shot a ripple of white foam from the bows, he was rowing in towards the shore.

This was the wish answered that his heart had cried. A moment later he was realising a new intent in their undeviating direction and their speed. They were coming right into the shore. They were going to land on the rocks.

Was it that they feared the sea too open a place? He began to wonder where he could go. It was impossible to stay any longer where he was. Still he waited, believing now they could not have seen him or they would have rowed beyond the next headland for their landing.

Down there below him those three hundred feet, the boat looked a flimsy thing for human lives to trust themselves in. It lay against the mass of rocks where Fennel had brought it, no bigger than a nut-shell floating on the water.

The fisherman clung with his hands to the limpet fringe the low tide had exposed to the sun. She stepped out onto the rocks. Her feet slipped on the slime of sea-weed. She swayed and balanced with her arms till she had climbed up on to a smooth plateau.

Then she looked back. The priest heard their voices far below them; the softness of her treble, the deep note of his bass. He could distinguish no words they said.

The next moment he was swallowing in his throat to keep back the rising of his heart with its sudden beating. Fennel was pushing off the boat. He was leaving her there. He was going away. His wooing was over. With slower strokes that seemed weighted with the aching of his arms, he was pulling out alone once more into the glistening solitude of the sea.

FATHER COSTELLO sat waiting. He did not move from his ledge of rock. In those first days of his enthusiasm he would have sought her out. Now, with a supreme effort of will, he held close. With movements of his eyes only, he watched her climb the easy ascent there of the cliffs, or looked out to see where the boat with its lonely occupant was slowly increasing its distance from the shore, slowly becoming faint and nebulous in the reflected lights and trembling beat of the air.

He could not suppose she had seen him yet. She climbed without looking upwards, negotiating each difficulty as it came. The shawl about her head was thrown back in the heat of the sun. Dropping to a loose cowl it hung between her shoulders. Exposed in that light, he could see her hair in the fullness of its colour.

She was not climbing straightly in his direction, but so nearly he knew she must pass him that their meeting seemed inevitable. Did he wish that it should be? He sat still with the stillness of the rock beneath him as though he hoped it would not, as though by some incomputable chance of fate she might pass by, ignorant of his presence there so near to her.

Not in such moments as those could he determine what it was he feared in their meeting. As it was with her always, so it had become then with him. He had no thought, but sensations only. Fear and a wild joy, a passionate power of restraint and then a trembling weakness, when all desire to command himself seemed to have become

fluid in his will, these, in sensations he could neither check nor determine, ran in a succession through his mind.

Whatever he felt he still sat motionless and then the fate he somehow believed was in it all, decided the issue. As she came level with him up the jutting face of the cliffs, she turned and looked across the uneven ledges of the rocks. In an automatic response to that, he acted at once.

"Good morning, Mary," he called out.

She called back good morning in a voice that was querulous, perhaps because of her want of breath from climbing. Then she made her way across to him. He rose to his feet. In a few moments they were standing, facing each other on his platform of rock with the glow of the light between them, the sea-gulls sweeping and winding over their heads and far across the water below them that fading speck of the boat with its occupant bending in his solitude over the oars.

Father Costello summoned all the quietness in his voice.

"What made you come to the rocks?" he asked. "There was I sitting here, thinking it must be a great wonder to you out there on the water and no sooner had I thought it, than Fennel turns the boat about and comes pulling in to the shore."

"Did ye know it was ourselves?"

"I did indeed!"

"How did ye know that?"

He gave her a laugh.

"Well—I can see. I've got two good eyes in my head, Mary."

"But shure, how could ye be tellin' a man or a woman at all with that great stretch of the sea was between ye?"

"No—I can't say I recognized you at first."

"Yirra, how did ye know them?"

"I remembered that day when you were milking—that day of the storm—that day Fennel came in for shelter.

You made him a promise—didn't you? The first fine day, you said, you would come out with him in his boat."

She looked up at him, frankly, into his eyes. In a natural consequence of thought, she turned her head then and looked across the water. The boat was melting into the mist. Though no detail of it was visible, she saw the man plainly there alone at his oars. Still frankly, she looked back at Father Costello as though expecting and unafraid of his rebuke.

"Ye think 'tis the way I've been cruel to him," she said, "I gettin' out on the rocks and leavin' him there to be goin' back with himself?"

Had he anticipated her answer, he would never have asked his question. It was with his mind utterly unprepared that he enquired why she had done it at all.

"I saw yeerself sittin' here," she replied with a guileless honesty, "I wanted to speak to ye. I wanted to say the shame I'd had for me boldness and the bad manners I gave ye that day in the house."

She had seen him. Because of that, she had asked to be put out on the rocks. It was she from a wish to be with him who had ended that wooing! He tried to return the straightness of her look. The frankness of her eyes frightened him. It was impossible. He turned his head away across the water to the boat. She read in his gesture more than in his eyes that he found her heartless in what she had done. With a quaint distress in her voice she begged to be told if that was what he thought.

Without looking round he said—

"Did you tell him it was that you wanted?"

"I did not of course."

He breathed relief.

"Then I should think it was hard on him," he said.

"It was, I s'pose."

He faced her quickly with a haste in his eyes that asked her why she supposed it. There was no need of his saying the word.

She hesitated. She did not want to say. Yet to whom could she speak better of such a thing than to a priest? Even if in her heart she knew that her marriage with Fennel would be the end of it, he could advise her; he could make her understand this reluctance in herself to be wife to any man.

"'Tis the way—'tis the way he wants me to marry him," she stammered.

"Thank God for that," he said quickly, and with an earnestness she heard plainer in his voice than he.

It was the last thing she wanted to hear. It seemed to make it more inevitable than ever. Then there was no escape. That was the way of her life, as she had heard it in Fennel's words—the way of every woman with no joy to her all the days of time.

"Shure I'm not after thankin' God meself," said she. "'Tis not a married woman I want to be at all."

It had been all she could say to Fennel. It was all she could say now to him. She knew no more really about it herself than that. In just those few words her sensations summed themselves up in her.

They had a more distressing sound to him now than when he had heard them before. In the urgent need they made in him, he began pleading with her like a man hastening to clinch a bargain.

"He's the best man in Ardnashiela," he said, as he had said before.

"Shure, I know that."

"Well, what is it in the name of God," he said, "keeps you from taking him when he wants to marry? You're a foolish girl, Mary Kirwan—you don't know the hardness of life,

or the help there'd be for a woman to have a man standing always by her as he'd stand by you. Why don't you say the word to him? There's not a man in the whole of the street would bring you the peace of life he could be giving you."

To her astonishment he suddenly took her arms as though she were a child that could be shaken into obedience if he had the power of will in him to be doing it. Instead he just held them fiercely in the grip of his fingers.

"Marry him, Mary!" he exclaimed. "Marry him! 'Tis the whole heart he has and he's giving it to you and it's not for yourself or any good woman to refuse the heart of a man like that!"

She had expected him to shake her, expected the action of it to accompany his holding of her like that. It was what men did in their tempers with things weaker than themselves. Often when she was younger, her father had shaken her. In the sound of his voice, she had felt the temper of the priest, because of her obstinacy perhaps, because of her folly too. And then, somehow, when it was only his fingers that gripped and hurt upon her arms and he only held her so, she sensed, without reason, as an animal scents danger, that it was not his anger so much as his fear. He was afraid of something. His fingers clutched with fear. They clung. The strength in them was not dominant.

All this she felt distantly in her blood and her flesh. It communicated with no reason to her brain. She experienced no more than a wonder why he said what he did. While he was still holding her arms, she looked up at him with penetrating query in her eyes.

"Why are ye sayin' all this?" she asked him straightly. "Don't ye rightly know I could be goin' on meself in the house, milkin' the cows and doin' the work there'd be for me on the farm the way me father would be glad to be

havin' me there and himself standin' by me if 'twas a man I'd be needin' at all? Why are ye standin' there, grippin' me arms and hurtin' me—" he dropped his hands as though she had struck them down—"and ye cryin' out to me to marry the man? Shure 'tis not a lonely girl I am, have no home to be goin' to. Why would ye be hurtin' me like that?"

She lifted her arm and bared it beyond the elbow. Perhaps her hands were rough with the work she did. If they were, they made the more conspicuous the soft whiteness of her arms.

He had seen many a woman's arms bared before and never known there was beauty in them, never considered that in their nakedness a woman was expressing the charm they had for any one to see who found it.

She held it out that he might see the red flesh where his fingers had marked her. Both of them, they stared at it. It was she who glanced away first and glanced at him. Somehow she knew then it was not at the mark alone he was looking, but at all her arm, nearly to the shoulder, like a bar of ivory in the sunlight.

Never supposing the riot in his mind or reading his thoughts, she acted swiftly with an almost automatic obedience to the instincts of her sex. More suddenly even than she had bared her arm, she pulled down the sleeve of her bodice and covered it again. It was so sudden as to be conspicuous, so sudden as to be a revelation to him. He knew what he had done. He knew then too what he had felt and thought. What was more fatal, he knew it had not escaped from her.

He felt that quick movement of hers to be a reproach. It smote across his conscience, whipping him to a double shame, a shame of himself, a shame to think he had forced her to modesty.

He could not meet her eyes then, but when she had pulled down the sleeve of her dress, turned his head away and looked over the water that in a faint change of light had varied to the colour of mackerel scales with iridescent blues and greens and shifting lights of pearly pink.

He thought, as it is common to think of women, that what she had done was a modesty in her. He did not know that her heart was beating with a wild and almost pagan joy as she did it. He did not know it was an automatic action, rooted deep in Nature itself. He had no experience with which to ask himself why a woman reveals her charm until it is seen and then in an impulsive instinct snatches it away. Without such an experience it was impossible for him to reason that there was little of modesty in it, but a purpose and as strong as life itself. He had never tried to fathom the unconscious motives women lived by when their hearts were stirred and, without guile or malice, they became obedient to the laws of Nature, seeking always to set free the first passionate spate of love that, once loosened, may flood as it wishes and to the ultimate sea if it will.

He did not even know that Nature was having its determined way with him when he seized her arms and had cried to her to marry Fennel, the fisherman. Never would he have believed that Nature too, was involved with her when, in a distant consciousness that her arm was not an ugly thing to see, she had bared it there in the sunlight to show him the mark his fingers had left. Still less could he conceive or she be made to realise that when, with that hasty movement, she had covered her arm again, she was acting at Nature's bidding to stir a deeper fire in him, or that at Nature's bidding her heart was beating, one dull thud after another in her breast.

There they stood, both of them, ignorant and afraid,

simple sport for the rough purposes of life. The very silence about them was pregnant with what it bore. And she was more ignorant than he. Still he was a priest to her.

Once she had seen Father O'Connor, his predecessor, with drink taken. He was leaning to steady himself against a wall on the Doonvarna road. They were alone. She had thought he was ill and had come hurriedly to his side asking was there any way at all she could help and was it the way he was sick. But the drink he had taken had gone only to his limbs maybe, for his voice and his senses had been clear enough for him to tell her to go away and mind her own business. She had known he was drunk then, but never in all that time had she admitted it to herself. It was sick the poor man was, she said in her mind and shielded him with that, not only to herself, but never spoke of it to another soul.

It was the same here with her now. She was ignorant and yet she knew. She knew but would not allow an instant's admission in her thoughts. He was a priest. He had his vows taken. There was nothing that any woman could be to him. The very thought of it was a sacrilege that made a shuddering in her. Yet there was the look she had seen in his face and here was the knowledge, so deeply implanted that she could never root it out of her mind.

What had happened to Father O'Connor had never concerned her more than in its relation to her sacred beliefs in the honour and glory of the priesthood. She could forget that. She could put it utterly away. She might think she could do the same here, but it was nothing more than a hope and one which a surging instinct threatened at every turn.

Still there was a wish below her thoughts, a fierce wish begotten of her preconceived idealisms of the priesthood,

to shield him from evil, to keep him exalted in her mind. She could not believe, as he stood there beside her, that in that moment he was nothing but a man. She fixed her eyes upon the familiar cloth on his shoulders, the distinguishing collar about his neck and, if not in so many words, she kept saying to herself he was a priest.

But these were fluid thoughts. They came and went. Riding upon them and every moment with her heart beating, she felt a passionate joy and pride in herself. It was the same joy, the same pride she had found that first day when Father Costello came out to the farm. His laughter as he went, saying he would walk as though he were going to a funeral, that, mingling with her own laughter, had struck the first spark of it. Ever since then, in the farm kitchen and most of all that evening in the hay-field, it had smouldered and burnt to a red glow in the inflammable substance of her heart.

It was a furnace now. The heat of it suffused her. She glowed with her pride that had no vanity in it. It was pride in herself as a woman that has stirred a man to passionate response.

It seemed to her then that she needed to know no more. This in itself was a greater thing than she had ever hoped of life. She would not realise there were more lofty heights of exaltation than this. He was a priest. As a priest she knew then she loved him, as she would have loved him had he been a man. If that were a sin—and she supposed it was—she was none the less glad of it. If it were a sin, it was one that could never sully him. Always he would have to her the wonder both of priest and man.

And now, having come to this, the greatest realisation she believed was in the world for her, she felt in a strange surprise at herself, that if it must be, she could marry Fennel, the fisherman, now. All that he needed for his

loneliness she could give him. The pity and kindness she had in her heart for him bore no relation to this. It could not touch, it could not approach the leaping furnace of her pride. This was a being within herself, left as it were in her charge to keep unspoiled and sacred all her life through for one who could never take it as his own.

The sensation of the vision it conveyed to her imagination almost pleased her. Renunciation did not enter into it. She flattered herself with no false vanity in what she thought. How could she give up what could never possibly be hers? She could marry Fennel, happily even, knowing the true man he was. Never in all their life together would he ask anything of her pride. If it were only because of the way he had spoken to her in the boat, she knew it was never that he needed. This which was her own she could keep always for herself and when she died—she definitely thought of this—it was Fennel's wife they would be burying under the grass up in the graveyard on the hill, whilst all that was her in her soul would be a spirit, wandering maybe and never at rest, but living always with the pride of the love that was in her.

This was the most concrete thought she had and with it, a glitter in her eyes, she looked up at Father Costello.

"I'll marry himself, if 'tis the way I ought to," said she.

He looked round at her quickly and caught the glitter in her eyes. Without knowing what it meant, he felt it to be the utmost edge of his endurance. The knowledge of what he had done had not escaped her. Yet that light he saw there was not reproach. If, as he supposed, there had been modesty in her responsive action, then, with that thrilling glitter in her eyes, it only served to torture and inflame him the more. Only her words saved him. With a shuddering sense of relief, he clutched at them to keep himself from falling.

"There's no question of duty in it," he said, more sharply than he meant, "it's your happiness I'm thinking of. You can't suppose I'd be urging you to marry him except for that."

Such belief she had of the priest he was and little understanding the true nature of the man, she asked why it happened that he put such a pass upon her happiness.

"Shure, there's no woman in this wildness of the land," she said, "thinks one way or another would there be any joy to her at all, but the things she'd be doin' with her hands and the food she'd eat or the sleep she'd be gettin' maybe to the last of her days."

It was her pride said it. She felt she was not one of these. It was because she believed he knew it also that she wanted to hear him say it, just in the words of his voice. All this was part of her fatality. She scarcely knew the abyss upon which she trod. With all the beauty that it had, it still was the solid earth on which she was walking in the sunlight of her pride. To be known, to have the hidden joy in her discovered and understood, was all she needed assurance of.

"And do you think you're like one of them?" he asked her shortly.

She could smile at him with her eyes and her lips even when she answered that. It was a smile of infinite sadness, infinite in longing, and yet a certain proudness in it with her brave acceptance of life.

"I dunno, am I," she replied, "and I dunno why shouldn't I be. Ain't I just one of those livin' on the land, might marry anny man and meself goin' with him one day and another till I'd be as like the rest as one stone'd be like another lying on the turn of the strand."

"You don't know you're quite different?"

"Shure, how could I?"

"I'm telling you you are."

"And what way would I be different?"

"Well—perhaps you wouldn't understand if I said there was a distance about you—something it would never be possible to get near to or understand. Do you know what Fate is?"

He was speaking so quickly now that she could scarcely follow him. All it seemed to her was that it had the sound of something intangible she too felt about herself; but more than that was the look, like an anger in his eyes, and the note of his voice that was angry too. She began to feel afraid of him, afraid of what he said, as though she feared any moment it was a bad woman he might be calling her, so fierce he looked.

"Do you know what Fate is?" he repeated.

She trembled, as though it were a stupid folly in her not to know what he meant. She shook her head.

"Things happen in the world," he said to her. "They happen without people knowing why or being able to prevent them. They seem as if they were meant to be from the very beginning of time."

She nodded. She did understand that.

"Well—that's Fate. It must be God that makes them happen, but when a man cannot see the reason of God in it at all, he calls it Fate."

He stopped and stared at her and his eyes were frightening, yet the fear she had was somehow exultant. There was a sense that something, terrible in its intensity, was about to burst upon her. Sensations were falling with loud reverberations in her mind.

"That's what there is in you," he said, "a Fate about you," and he said it almost with accusation in the note of his voice. "That's what makes you different from all the rest of them. That's why your happiness depends on

your marrying Fennel. He'll help you. Don't you understand that? He'll keep you, if any man can. He'll keep you from all the things that can happen to you in the world."

Every nerve in her was trembling now. When with a sudden movement he turned away and passed by her on the ledge of rock, when he began climbing with hasty steps to the cliff path above them, she had no power to stop him. She had no will even to ask him why he went. It seemed right that he should go. It seemed the only thing possible. She did not even watch him, but sat down slowly where they had been standing. She felt she could no longer support the weight of her body. Her limbs refused it. She knew no more than that if she died there then would be a mercy of God to bring death to her; that she would not fear it; that it would be a happy freedom.

She stared at the sea and just asked herself from what it was she had escaped and supposed it must be that which he had called the Fate that was in her.

VI

WHEN Fennel had left Mary on the rocks, he pulled out some distance to sea before he returned to Ardnashiela. He saw her meeting with the priest. There was no significance in that to him. He was glad of it. If she was speaking to the priest at all, it was good advice he would be giving her. But he feared that to be unlikely. The untraversable distance he felt between himself and her did not suggest a ready confidence of speech with any one. He just thought she would say nothing.

Had he seen them so long there together on that ledge of rock, he might have thought differently; might have believed she was telling him everything. But he turned the headland and was out of sight long before they parted. Rowing back to Ardnashiela, his mind did little more than listen to the sounds of his oars in the rowlocks and to the quick running of the water along the sides of the boat.

There was no mind in him for introspection. He had no ability of thought to weigh a matter out. She had neither refused nor accepted him. He felt himself left like a boat drifting, with no motive power, no course or direction.

In such a mood as this he dimly knew himself to be a prey to the unseen powers about him. It was at night most often it came upon him. Never in the daytime had he seen things on the water or heard the sounds he frequently heard when the darkness gathered like a crowd, whispering about the boat. This was his loneliness. It was the loneliness common to all those people, cut off there from

the world and cast away in the black solitariness of life.

Some of them on the sea-wall had observed his going out with Mary Kirwan. With a measure of apprehension, he expected that. He came into the boat cove quickly, timidly, hoping to escape the ordeal of their laughter. If at that point, without notice, he could have climbed the face of the cliff to the cliff road where his cottage stood, he would have done so gladly. The formation of the rocks just there, however, compelled him to pass the sea-wall.

As he came up the slope of shingle to the street, a shout of voices and the hard sounds of laughter greeted him. It struck against his face like stones thrown, as without hesitation and with the same kind of laughter, they would have thrown them at a stray dog. He felt his cheeks in a dull flame.

Some one called out asking where he had left her.

"Was it sick she was?" another one shouted to him. "Was it sick she was, the way ye'd be rockin' the boat to tease her?"

The woman who lived alone on the Doonvarna road cried out to him in a shrill voice that pierced above the others:

"'Tis long and lonesome the nights 'ud be, Joe Fennel, for a man has no wife to be cuddlin' him."

Encouraged and emboldened by laughter she went on with a free tongue to describe the joys of marriage. Her coarse ironies were a delight to them. "Why wouldn't she know," they said, "has been twice married herself and no sayin' what's happened her since she buried her last?"

He stood there amongst them to face it out, knowing it must be met sooner or later. Wasn't it better they should empty themselves of their jokes on him alone, than in Mary's ears for her to be hearing them? For what would she think of marriage with himself or any man to hear that woman spitting out the dirt of her words? More

than ever wouldn't she say 'twas not marrying she wanted to be at all? If marriage was filth the way that woman made of it, wouldn't she be saying that?

With all the signs of their amusement spending itself, he turned away to the cliff road. A stray jest or a laugh followed him—the last stones rattling into silence at a dog's heels. But he had not given them the satisfaction of running away. They could not see the dull anger in his eyes then.

"May they die and rot in hell!" he muttered to himself as he walked down the street. "May they die and the dirt is in them be a heap on their bodies till the last day!"

Unsatisfying to himself as was this voice of his hatred, it was more articulate and fulfilling than the voice of his love. He did not know what it was he felt about Mary Kirwan. A great tenderness—but he did not know what tenderness was. A wish—not to boast of, but to shield her with his strength—he could appreciate that. He knew he could suffer much for her, as just then he had suffered from the voices of their mocking and laughter.

What else could a man suffer for a woman besides? Hunger? There should be no want under his roof as long as he had breath in his body and hands to cast a net with. But what if this ill-fortune still followed him, if he lost his catch from the holes They made with Their mischief in his nets and his lobster pots were still taken from him? What could he do then?

He sat alone over the fire in his cottage for the rest of that day till the night came, feeling, like a blind man with his hands upon the walls, down the alleys of his mind.

He would take her away from that place if the fishing failed him. If need be he would take her across the water to the Western States. All who came back from there

said there was money falling in a stream like water running into the hands of those would be strong enough to work for it. He felt strong enough. That was the clearest of the sensations of his love for Mary Kirwan. He felt his strength in his arms and his hands and the will of his heart. It was not at all when he was with her he felt it. That morning it had seemed to him he was like a child, fumbling with the oars. But now, alone with himself by the side of his fire, he knew he could be strong for her. Taking up the iron rod he had to stir the ashes with, he saw his hand and the muscles starting up his arm from the thick wrist. It was little more than this he knew in actual thought of his love for Mary Kirwan.

With the orange glow of the fire, the darkness was a deep blue outside his little window. He could see the stars in a glitter piercing through it. It was still weather. If it kept like that there would be sprats soon coming into the bay and the mackerel after them. He had made no money for three weeks. Never had he grudged so much taking a shilling here and a shilling there from the box hidden beneath his bed.

The thought of it brought him to his feet. He lit a candle and lifted out the box from its hiding place. He had never counted his money before. Whatever he realised on a successful haul, he put away, only drawing from it on such occasions as this, a piece of silver at a time, clung with fishes' scales, reeking in a stink of decay that made no offense in his nostrils.

Quite unconscious that in what he was doing he had admitted a new influence into his life, he emptied the contents of the box out on to the table. There was silver and copper money and stray pieces of gold, all tarnished with the salt of the sea. Here and there a dried mackerel scale glittered in the light of the candle. There were a

few pieces of paper money like pieces of rag, begrimed with the dirt of handling fingers. It all lay in a heap on the table as it might have been a pile of rubbish on the counter of a marine store dealer's shop.

He began counting it piece by piece with clumsy fingers and laborious calculations, walking round the table while he added one half-crown to another and, sitting down with his head in his hands when it came to the matter of a piece of gold. He was in vital earnestness about it. He wanted to make no mistake. This was no miserliness he had but a practical consideration of the issue before him.

He would ask for no dowry with Mary Kirwan. It was herself he wanted. If James Kirwan was a prosperous farmer he was well-known to be a close-fisted man. There should be no price with her, laying him under obligation to her family for the rest of his life.

"'Tis herself I'm wantin'," he muttered sometimes in the midst of his calculations. "Twenty-six pounds—twenty-six pounds—'tis herself I'm wantin'—twenty-six pounds two and sixpence—Shure 'tis not money I'm wantin' with herself at all but—twenty-six pounds two and ninepence—not money or any damned thing at all but herself only—twenty-six pounds three—twenty-six pounds three." So he added and reckoned and wrestled with the matter in his thoughts, walking about in the faint candle light, his shadow moving with him like a giant up and down the walls. Or he would sit a moment by the fire, but always he was shifting the greasy coins from one side of the table to the other as he counted them out.

So engrossed was he, and so loud the words he said in his breath were sounding in his mind, that a knock on his door never reached his ears.

"Twenty-six pounds three and eightpence," he murmured. "Twenty-six pounds three and eightpence—"and then with

the noise of the latch and the cold air of the night suddenly about him, he looked up to find Father Costello standing in the doorway.

Fennel stared at him in a mute confusion. He was too concerned at being discovered in his occupation to observe the distress in the priest's face, the hollow appearance in his cheeks, as though hunger had been at them. His mind was capable of one thought only at a time. With a childlike intuition, he supposed the priest would understand at once the reason for what he was doing.

"Good evening, Father," he said and smiled awkwardly and was just about to sweep all the money off the table into the box again.

Father Costello shut the door and came forward quickly catching his arm.

"What are you stopping for?" he said. "You haven't counted it all. Go on—count it all, man. Shure, I'll help you meself."

"Twenty-six pounds three and eightpence," said Fennel.

"Twenty-six pounds three and eightpence," the priest repeated and began separating the copper from the silver, the gold and the bank notes. In a few minutes it was all counted, an evil-smelling lump of money on the table. Father Costello smelt his hands and looked with a wry smile at the fisherman.

"Forty-nine pounds thirteen and fivepence," he said.

Fennel's mouth was open. He was bewildered at the speed with which it had all been reckoned. It was great learning he must have to count money like that. He was more impressed by it than any sermon he had ever heard Father Costello preach from the pulpit.

"Faith, I dunno how did ye do it at all with that quickness," he said.

Father Costello walked over to the fire and sat down.

He was staring into the heart of the peat glow as he said—"And that's all for herself—isn't it!"

Not knowing what to say to that, Fennel swept all the money off the table back into the box and put it away again under the bed. Presently he came back to the fire and sat down in silence opposite the priest. In silence he turned the bellows wheel for a few revolutions. The fire breathed a splutter of sparks and then broke into flame.

Still, he waited, saying nothing. The priest, he calculated, had some reason to be coming there to his cottage at that hour of the night. Presumably he would say sooner or later what it was. He waited; looking now at his nets hanging over the rafters below the thatch; now looking at the fire and then at the priest himself.

An intangible sense that something was the matter began to stir in him. He began to feel it was concerned with Mary herself. She had spoken to Father Costello about it that morning. That must be what it was. She had asked him to come and speak for her, to tell him it was no good his hoping, that, as he had always felt it to be, she was not for the likes of him.

It was not in him to feel great depths of emotion, but in that moment all vitality of hope had gone out of his spirit. He looked about him in a childish bewilderment. He could not realise it was possible. Believing this to be the meaning of the priest's visit and that here was the end of it for him, he understood then to what an extent he had allowed his imagination to dwell upon the thought of her.

With the dogged persistence of hope, he had brought her there with him to live under the thatch of his roof ever since that day they had met at the farm. They had sat by the fire together not talking, but with him just glad of the sight of her there. They had sat there together in the room eating their food. It was her presence, the spirit of her

and her kindness he had brought back rather than her body. If the physical joys of her company had entered into his imagination, he would have known it sooner. He would have thought of her in that time as actually there with him in the flesh. He had not done that. It was only now when he knew he was going to lose her that he realised she had been there with him at all.

In 'almost petulant revolt at the suspense of that silence between them, he turned to the priest.

"Say what it is ye're come for," he said, short of voice, wishing to hear it quickly and know the worst. "Shure, I saw ye talkin' on the cliffs the time I'd be rowin' away from the rocks. She won't have me is it? 'Tis the way I'm not the sort for the whimsy likes of her."

"'Tis not whimsy at all she is," said Father Costello, and would have said more and could have talked of her till dawn broke, but checked his tongue.

"Why won't she have me then?"

Father Costello raised his eyes that were hunted with thought and weary with the effort to escape.

"I never said she wouldn't," he replied and with the sight of bewildered incredulity in the fisherman's eyes he roused himself to the will of his purpose. "She will have you," he went on and eagerly now. "She'll have you now if you ask her again. That's what I came up here to tell you. Don't waste a day. Go out to the farm to-morrow—ask her and ask himself and settle it up between you. You needn't think she's whimsy. She'll make a good wife to you."

Fennel tried to speak. His emotion was like too much breath, stifling him in his throat. He saw nothing in all the priest was saying except as it affected himself. The eyes sharply bright in a fever that watched him, the lips, haggard almost and thin with desperate determination, the whole expression of the priest racked with the suffering of

those few hours since the morning, brought not the faintest realisation to his mind. He just took the sense of the words as he heard them.

"What's all the quickness for?" he asked thickly. Never would his nature have driven him as swiftly as this if he had been left to himself. "Is there another man is after her?" His eyes sought Father Costello's as keenly as when he would be watching from the high point of the headlands for the sight of fish coming into the bay.

Without fear—with a challenge even—Father Costello met his look.

"There might be," he said slowly. "D'you think a girl like that is going to pass the thought of every man but yeerself? Take her now, Joe Fennel, 'tis I'm telling you. Don't be waiting or wasting your time. She's not like any girl about these parts. Shure, how would you know what would be in her mind?"

Fennel just understood that somewhere there was a danger lurking. With no conviction of belief, he accepted Father Costello's assurance she would take him then if he asked her. He understood no more than this. He never knew the danger lay so near to him. There was not even the suspiciousness of curiosity in him to seek it out.

She would marry him if he asked her—however soon. This was all he could think. But now that his vision of her had become tinged with reality, his mind moved more confusedly in a dream than ever.

The priest watched him, swaying a little with the ponderous weight of his thoughts as he sat over the fire.

This was the man Mary Kirwan was to meet and mingle her life with. He knew for the first time then what it was she feared in marriage. Looking at the fisherman now that the fever was exhausted in his eyes with the fulfillment of his purpose, he could see what it was that was lacking to

give her life. More than this, he knew he had it in himself. She knew it too. They had learnt it both that morning by the sea. How far she realised it he did not dare allow himself to think. Perhaps not at all. She had agreed upon his advice to marry the fisherman. That was enough. He would think no more than that.

"You'll go out to Kirwan's then to-morrow," he said presently.

Fennel looked up. There was a dull wonder in the look of his face. It was the end of his loneliness. There would be a kindness in life about him now. Without knowing how near to the truth it was, he felt as if it were the priest who had brought Mary to him and in a simple impulse of gratitude he suddenly thrust out his hand. Father Costello took it with a ready response. As he gripped it, he felt the coarse knots of the knuckle bones and the rough grain of the skin. In a torrent of physical sensation the thought of her arm, bared to the shoulder, came back to him. How well he knew then what she meant when she had no wish to be wed!

With an effort he held the fisherman's hand. He smiled even, as a man smiles, proudly giving assurance he is not suffering more pain than he can bear. This was his bolt shot. The smoke from the fire, the heat of the room, his emotions, all were suffocating him. Had he been hemmed in a crowd he could not have felt more the need for air to be breathing it clean into his lungs. His sensations were a riot with panic and stress, yet he behaved outwardly like a man in an unconsidered calm of mind.

There was a deliberate slowness with which he dropped Fennel's hand and rose to his feet. It seemed to himself that if for an instant he submitted to the urging impulse to get away it would be beyond his power to control what he did or said.

Only when the latch was lifted, the door open and shut behind him, when the black night was there for him to hide in and the salt air a blessed chill on his face, did he set free the stifled moan from his lips his breath was holding.

It was not back to the village he turned, but along the path of the cliffs, rolling like a man to the driving of a whip across his shoulders till he reached the ledge of the rock where they had stood together that morning. His spirit found no quiet till then, till pain had numbed it.

VII

REVELATION had come to Mary Kirwan.

When, after an hour alone on that ledge of rock in the surrounding silence of the sea, she had raised herself out of a dream and turned her face towards Ardnashiela again, she was no longer the girl that Fate had marked out for its purpose. In that hour she had become a woman, virgin still, yet with her destiny begun.

She knew now that marriage was no mere happening. It was not a crude and scheduled event in life as it was in the barn yard.

In little other manner than this and with no morbidity of thought, she had always regarded it. In such a manner as this it seemed so to be regarded by others living in that custom of life in Ardnashiela. If that morning she had had a glimpse of it otherwise in Fennel, it was because, by then, the revelation had partly been brought her by another.

Now it was wholly brought.

The look in Father Costello's eyes as they had dwelt upon her bared arm, the sound of anger in his voice and all he had said when he had spoken to her afterwards, the fear as well that she had heard in him, these were the outward and visible signs that had shown her this new revelation of life. What other than these definite things had wrought the change in her, she could neither know nor understand.

There was more beside—a whole world more beside—but her mind could not reach it.

Her perceptions simplified themselves into one thought.

Marriage—the impulse that brought together the lives of men and women—was not what she had supposed it to be. Had she known the word—fusion—she might have used it there. But there was no wish or attempt in her to define her thoughts. Life—as it does with so many—was educating her with sensations, not with ideas.

Over that mile of headland path, back to Ardnashiela, winding tortuously to the bidding of the contour of the cliffs, she thought of her mother and father, of their marriage and the life together they had led. She saw her mother then as she had never seen her before. Behind that remoteness and solitary detachment from life, Mary seemed, with no clear penetration, to discern the shadow of her own life with Fennel, the fisherman.

But had her mother known what she knew now, had she seen what she had seen, felt, thrilled, and responded to, what she was feeling in every pulsing passage of her blood, would her life have been so empty—so inert?

She had said she would marry Fennel. She had meant it. Even then she meant it, conscious of the dragging of her steps home to the farm. There was no meaning to the word—lover—in the whole breath of her experience. She had never conceived of such a relationship. Women as she knew of them, married or they went alone through life.

If Father Costello had not been a priest, then for some reason—not reckoned in her understanding—that morning had shown her they belonged to each other. There was a sense of possession between her and him, between him and her. But being a priest of the Church, sanctified not merely because his vows had been taken, she put him utterly beyond her. If there was a fear at all in the possession she knew he had of her, it revealed itself in the constant hope in her heart that they would not meet again till she was Fennel's wife. She had felt the possibility of being that as

they stood together on the rocks. She had promised it. She did not realise it was because of her own fear that she felt the pressing need of it now.

They were seated round the deal table at the midday meal when she entered the kitchen and closed the door behind her. As she crossed to her chair, she found that perception had been quickened in her to almost painful acuteness. They knew where she had been. From the sharp looks in her father's eyes as he filled his mouth with a weighty forkfull she could nearly have thought he knew the fluttering that was a torment in her breast. There seemed no less a new meaning in the downcast eyes of her mother and the silence that was like a veil about her face.

"Where have ye been in the name o' God?" he asked her before there was room in his mouth for words.

But she knew he had heard. Some one come out to the farm had brought the gossip of the news. She told him plainly it was a fool he was asking when he knew right well where she had been.

"Is it with Fennel, the fisherman, in his boat ye've been!"

He would have her admit it and was pacified for a moment with satisfaction when she did. Another large mouthful of food gave him occupation, but did not distract the thoughts he had had ever since he had heard of it. He knew they thought him prosperous in Ardnashiela. He had always expected this to happen some day or another. They would be coming after his girl in the house to get his money. But if they did they should bring full return with them.

Ever since Mary had come of an age so that he could see by her breast under the fold of the bodice that there were signs of the woman about her, he had thought in resentfulness of this moment. He never liked being compelled to sell a beast from his farm, as a shortness in the crop of hay sometimes made him. His success as a farmer lay in the

fact that he fatted well and knew the moment when to dispose of what he had. His bargainings with Shaughnessy the butcher were often lengthy and vituperative. At other times they were amicable enough because they knew they served each other. But on these occasions the sound of their voices, emerging from Shaughnessy's cottage where in that one room he lived and slept and slaughtered and hung his sheep, could be heard all down the street.

For some years he had thought of the possibility of Mary's marriage with such calculations as these. The man who came for her would want a dowry to be taking her. Well—he could want. There was all and more than its value he must bring along with him when he came. It would be for her welfare that he should. But this was not the thought that ruled him. He wanted his bargain square and if any proportion was wanting in it, he intended it should be in his favour.

There was a persistent hope in him she would never marry at all. He knew her worth. It was calculated in his mind to a farthing and there was a secret joy he kept in his heart that there was no man in that place had substance enough to ask for her.

For this reason he had never allowed her to go outside Ardnashiela. On one or two occasions when the opportunity had arisen for her to go to Doonvarna, he had whipped himself into the frenzy of his temper when Mrs. Kirwan for the sake of peace had advised her to give up all thought of it.

And now apparently there was a man at last had seen the woman she was and set his eyes on her. He laughed when he heard who it was. Nevertheless he knew well that the Parish Priest and Father Costello would be against him and that if the fisherman persisted he must lose a hand on his farm that would have to be replaced to the detriment of his

pocket. It was quickly enough he came from laughter then to the sullen anger of resentment.

"What in the name of hell," he asked, spluttering his food and returning to the full measure of his wrath at the pressure of events, "what in the name of hell d'ye want goin' out in a boat with a man like that! Is it the bad name ye want to be gettin' for yeerself—or what is it ye want? Aren't they nasty fellas, those would be gettin' fish out of the sea? Isn't it drinkin' always they are and shure God knows what dirty women they'd be goin' with in the little streets the time they'd be sellin' a catch in Doonvarna."

Mary ate her food without answering. It was like the dust and the shavings of wood in her mouth. His resentment pricked itself to anger at her silence.

"'Tis plenty of words ye have at most times," he said in the rise of his voice. "Why can't ye be speakin' now? Was it sayin' sly things he was to ye and ye away there out of hearin' in the boat? Was it touchin' ye he was and soft with his eyes? Begor, I'd split the head of any man with the clout I'd lay on him would come sayin' nasty little words to the girrl in my house!"

Mary thrust her food away.

"'Twas sayin' nothin'," she flung at him, "but words anny man might be sayin' in a decent way to a girl he wanted to be havin' for his wife."

"Ah—!"

With a clatter, James Kirwan laid down his knife and fork. It had come then. It was a new girl he would have to be getting to milk the cows and make the butter in the house, and be feeding the beasts in the yard. And it was Fennel, the fisherman, who wanted her and had money they all said, put by in his cottage up there on the cliff road. He could conceive no other reason for this turn of events than the dowry which Fennel must be hoping to get with her.

His small eyes sharpened to shrewd calculations as he estimated what amount he could possibly have saved up there out of his fishing.

Mrs. Kirwan got up from the table. With no comment on the matter, she took her seat in the open chimney and picked up a handful of her rushes from the floor. The blind man had come in from his food outside and seated himself opposite to her. In a silence and a stillness they sat, hearing the voice of Mary and her father as though it were an entertainment of strolling players they were listening to. The look of a stubborn but distant attention settled upon their faces. They might have been understanding far more of the play than the players understood themselves. They might have been understanding so much less. From no expression that passed across their lips or eyes could it be seen if they detected the mercenary impulses in the farmer's mind or the surge of passion beating behind Mary's words. Like spectators they sat, rigid, remote and imperturbable, facing each other in their corners of the fire; yet like spectators, inseparable from the play itself.

The wavering of the flames flushed and faded on their faces. The peat smoke rose, a waving scarf of blue, between them up the chimney. From all that was happening they were inseparable, yet they took no part, or looked, but listened only and waited for the end.

That clatter of Kirwan's knife and fork, the exclamation of his voice, and the storm of his anger that it promised, brought the foreboding of a moment's lull into the silence. Then he shattered it.

"An' why is it he wants to have ye for his wife?" he shouted in the high temper of his voice. "Shure 'tis no more'n the flighty bit of a girrl ye are, could not be mindin' the house of anny man, or cookin' food would be fit for him to eat! Isn't it the bit of money he wants to be gettin'

with ye, makes the soft words he'd be sayin'? Ah shure, 'tis a little fool ye are to be listenin' to them tales of those thievin' fellas on the sea. Doesn't the world know 'tis easy they are with their fine talk and their coaxy ways? Begor, 'tis not the sight of a silver or a copper piece at all he'll be gettin' out of meself, the time he comes out here with the soft sickness of love he'd be havin' in his voice to be askin' for ye."

It seemed almost when first he began that she cared little for anything he might say. But the new pride that was in her was stung to retaliation now. She stood and faced him sitting there, wiping his mouth and the food from his moustache with the back of his hand.

"'Tis none of yeer filthy money a man like himself 'ud be wantin'!" she cried at him. "Shure, isn't it money he has himself and what would he be wantin', takin' it from ye to sour his food with? 'Tis meself he's askin' for and 'tis meself'll give him the answer when he comes for it. And there's Father Costello and maybe the Parish Priest himself will be standin' up bi the side of me when I'd be givin' it. For there's a man, surely, will not work me hands to the bare bones the way ye'd be doin' in this place."

"'Tis damned good food ye have," he retorted.

"It is," said she, "if I could ever forget it."

"And a springy bed, with a good matrass I bought in Doonvarna."

"Wisha, God help us!" she cried to a pitch of laughter—"Haven't ye worn the springs of that bed long ago with the talk ye'd be puttin' on it." Suddenly her tone altered to a note intense with tragic determination. "I wouldn't stay under this roof," she told him, "not if ye gave me all the beds to be lyin' in from Doonvarna to Dublin itself. Isn't it the bad kind of man ye've been always to meself?" She came up close to him till he was frightened of her and

moved away. "That evening ye killed me little dog," she said, "with the miserable fear was on ye, didn't I know well 'twas not in yeer heart to be doin' the right thing by me? Shure I don't care is it a sin or not, I hate ye—d'ye hear me now?—I hate ye and there'll be hate in me always with the last breath I'll take."

In the weight of silence that fell about them as her words ceased, Mrs. Kirwan laid down at her side the bag she had finished with a movement almost of satisfaction as of one in whom something has been accomplished. With no glance in their direction, she picked up the rushes from her lap to begin the next.

VIII

FENNEL came out from Ardnashiela to the farm the next day. He walked the mile of strand as a child walks—distantly musing. It was not in him to think what he should say. Just his first spoken words to James Kirwan perhaps he knew. He could voice them as they would be said by him and did voice them—"I'm wantin' yeer daughter Mary, to be making her me wife—" till his mind was tired of hearing them. It was because he could not construct in his imagination what the farmer would say then that he grew tired of repeating it and walked by the sea's edge in a mist of thought. A gull flying, a piece of sea-weed at his feet, were enough to distract his mind, but for no more than a moment. The next he would be lost again in shadowy speculations, or saying aloud, almost without hearing himself,

"I'm wantin' yeer daughter Mary to be makin' her me wife."

Mary herself was there when, with the proclaiming music of the rusty gate, he came into the yard. She was feeding the chickens, a mongrel brood of them. Whites and yellows, reds and browns, that came with flitting runs from all directions to the note of her call.

He stopped before he opened the gate, listening to the sound of her voice as she cried to them. The only musical instruments he had ever heard in his life were the harmonium in the church and the fiddle that was played at the dancing in Creasy's house or at the cross roads where the way from Ardnashiela forks here through the hills of Doon

and there to Killanardrish. Listening to the note she called her chickens with, he might have said he had heard yet another, sweeter to him than all. But he knew the sensation only. It was not a thought he had.

When he opened the gate and it cried the shrill note on its hinges, she looked up. She wore no shawl. The sun was in her hair. The long oval of her face was unbroken. There was no closing shadow to hide the pity he had found for kindness in her eyes. And she was to be with him all their lives together.

He moved towards her, wondering more than he had ever wondered, how it could be true. She went on throwing the scattering grain from the tin basin she carried in the curve of her arm, until he was beside her. He was more drawn by a fear to her then than he had ever felt or known he had been drawn to her before. It was not a fear that frustrated him. It impelled him blindly on.

"I never thanked ye as I ought for the row in the boat," said she. It was easier for her to break their silence than for him. Such native intelligence as she had was far quicker than his. "Shure, God help us, 'tis come!" her heart was crying out within her, and these were words that had to be silenced and it was words only she could find to hide her heart with then.

He muttered it was not thanks he had wanted. There was only one gratitude he knew of from her.

"I've come up to see himself," he told her abruptly.

It had come on her! It had come on her! With what she had said the day before at their mid-day meal, there was no escape for her now.

She heard herself asking him what for it was he wanted to see her father. He did not know from where in him the setness of his intent had come when he said,

"To speak to him about yeerself."

She looked swiftly at him as a bird looks for an open space when suddenly it finds itself imprisoned in a room.

"I never gave me word to ye," said she.

"But didn't ye give it all the same?"

"What way d'ye mean at all did I give it?"

"Didn't ye give it to Father Costello?"

There was no thought or wish in him to be driving her. He said simply what it was he had heard. If she had said that to the priest and with what the priest had said to him, must there not indeed be the whole of truth in it?

How could he ever know that now in her heart she was like the bird in the room that has found no opening of escape, but is beating its wings in a frenzy against the window pane.

She could see the world outside, beyond the resisting substance of Fate against which her thoughts were bruising themselves. But the sight of it was going from her. She knew she was beating against the transparent walls of her prison in vain. There was no escape. She was caught. Human hands would soon be holding her. Father Costello had told him what she had said.

With an unerring rush of her instinct, she knew why. He was afraid as she was afraid. He had gone then that same day to tell Fennel what she had said. Not an hour had he let slip by. She had not known till then how much afraid he was. She felt her own fear increase with his. But more terrible than the fear she had was her joy, rising like a high wind and striking a penetrating note through every fibre of her being. As her heart tuned to the sound of it, she wanted to hear more. Every word he told her had its bitterness, but for the joy she felt, she could suffer it then.

"When was it he told ye that?" she asked him.

"Last night."

"Where did ye see him then?"

"He came up to me cottage on the road."

"Did he say why was it he told ye at all?"

"He did."

"Why was it?"

"Well—'twas not sayin' it he was."

She looked at him, frowning—confused.

"'Twas the way I made out from what he said. 'Twas another man there was and he wantin' ye. 'D'ye think,' said he, 'a girrl like that,' said he, 'is goin' to pass the thought of every man but yeerself?' 'Tis those were the very words he said and didn't I know bi that there was another man he was meanin'?"

She had no sense of what it was that lifted her, but a sudden pride and daring held her straight as she looked at him.

"Did ye ask himself who it was?" she said.

"I did not," said he.

"An' is it the way ye're not goin' to be askin' me?"

"Shure, I am not. What differ does it make to me what man it would be set his eyes on ye, if a be 'tis ready ye are to be givin' me the word yeerself."

"Well—if ye don't want to know," she suddenly volunteered, "I'll tell ye all the same, for there's no man has asked me."

And she said this, not because her daring was gone, but because an unbidden need to protect the priest had urged itself upon her. In that very admission of the truth which wore her lie upon the breast of it, she almost felt she was holding him closer to her than any other man would come in her life.

And then, because she could not leave it alone, she asked him was there more the priest had said to him that night and he told her what more there was.

“‘Ye’ll go out to Kirwan’s then to-morrow,’ shure, those were the last words he said to me,” he concluded.

In a swift conversion of mind, her daring left her. It was now she felt the human hands in the final surrender of her life. This it seemed, in a poignant but confused sensation, was the last glimpse she would have of the world outside. It was a distant sight. It was obscure—just the repetition of a few words, bringing an added light perhaps about her revelation, but not repeated by the voice that had said them. It was like some one sending a message of farewell, the actual words that were used, but in the voice of another, sounding unutterably far away.

With a sharp gesture, she tossed her head away from him to hide the sudden rise of tears. Fennel stood waiting, confused with the riddle she was to him, and too timid to ask for explanation of that gesture. He did not even suspect if it was tears she was hiding. Something, he thought at first, had suddenly attracted her attention. His eyes had followed the swift turn of her head. There was nothing that he could see to distract her and then, when still she kept her head averted and with the faint droop there was about it, his heart moved to a blindness of understanding and compassion.

“I won’t go and see himself,” he said with a real gentleness. “If ’tis the way ye’ve changed yeer mind from the words ye said yesterday to the Father, shure I’ll be goin’ back now to Ardnashiela. Yirra, ’twas never the fair hold of a hope I had at all to be gettin’ ye. Isn’t there somethin’ is strange and sweet about ye would be above the likes of me?”

It was the first thing with a compelling note of tenderness in it he had said to her. But beside this there was the response of memory of what the priest had said that brought

her round with the tears still gathering their weight in her eyes and coursing down her cheeks.

"What d'ye mean is strange?" she asked quickly and gently too, because of that first tenderness he had shown her. "Shure what is there is strange about me?"

"Faith—I dunno."

"Is it strange in me mind I am?"

"It is not."

"Is it the way I'd be lookin' strange then? Wisha, Glory be, isn't it many girrls the like of meself there are and they passin' along the roads without anny would be givin' them a turn of the head!"

"'Tis not lookin' strange in yeer face ye are," said he.

"Is it a fate then I have in me?" she asked him, knowing no more what that meant than when Father Costello had told her of it on the rocks. At a hazard she offered it to Fennel with a touch of the mimicry that was in her and the half of a hope beside that it might reach his understanding.

But he just stood shaking his head and looking at her whom now in a tenderness he was ready to lose if it was only the pain in her mind he was bringing her.

"'Tis strange and sweet ye are," he reiterated. It was all he knew. It was all he could say.

She looked at him queerly to think he could treat her so well. There was not another man she knew in all that place would treat her with so much gentleness and she found her heart aching for him beside the aching it had for herself.

"Would ye go back to Ardnashiela if I asked ye?" she said.

"I would so."

"The way ye'd be givin' back the word I gave to the priest?"

"I would indeed."

Knowing so little of life as she did, she felt this was the supreme moment in her own. Nothing was to be made easy for her but in the bitter need there was to set up some barrier between herself and the priest. After what she had heard from Fennel it was more plain to her now than it had ever been, yet the less obscure it became the more a deafening impulse to know the utmost, even if it brought damnation, resounded through every sense.

Her breath was coming quickly. Her heart was pounding its vibrations through her breast. In her mind she did not know which she would choose and listened, amazed, to some automatic function in her voice as she said,

"Ye'll find himself out in the fields if ye want to be goin' to him now."

Fennel stared and drew his breath.

"That's yeerself then givin' me the word?"

"It is."

She turned to the house and went in through a slant of sunlight that was falling across the darkness in the doorway.

IX

IT was drawing close to evening. There were warm lights gathering. The shadows of the solitary thorn trees were beginning to slope across the land. Fennel found the farmer in the barley field. He was waiting with his gun for pigeons that roved over the corn in marauding flocks for plunder.

When Kirwan saw the fisherman coming down the headland of the field, he spat out the brown juice of his half chewed tobacco on the ground. It was an instinctive action, expressing annoyance with him, just as when a cat spits, or a dog bristles the hair down its back. He did not know he had done it.

There was no doubting what the fisherman had come for; but beside the trouble of that, there was the vexation of being deprived of his shooting. It was difficult enough with all his cunning to trick them to a sense of security. There would be no pigeons coming there that evening with two men in the field.

He cursed the fisherman with an oath under his breath and released the hammers of his gun. As Fennel came up he told him with no tone of grace he had spoilt his shooting for him that evening.

There was no treatment that suited the fisherman better than this. A storm at sea and an angry man were about the only two things that eased him of his timidity. The pigeons that ate James Kirwan's barley were of little account to him then. He knew he was there to ask no favours. He had Father Costello with him and even the

Parish Priest would be all for upholding marriage, between a man and a girl who had given her word.

"I've come to ask for yeer daughter, Mary, James Kirwan," he said, and he made no doubt in his voice that this was a mere formality.

The farmer became obsequious at once. He knew no other method of treating a man who spoke like that. Yet with all his fawning, he kept the suppleness of his cunning ready to serve him when it came to the question of her dowry.

"I wouldn't be surprised at anny man comin' to me for that," said he. "'Tis a fine girrl she is and quick and steady with her hands. Shure, God knows what I'll be doin' in this place the time some man'll be takin' her away."

Fennel informed him the time was come now and that it was himself was there to be taking her the first day she'd come with him and the priest was ready to say the word over them.

James Kirwan had a sniggle of laughter for this. It was easy to talk in this grand way, but there were things to be settled between them and with a man of the law too, maybe, in Doonvarna, before he could be rushing off with her to the priest.

"There's no dowry ye'll be gettin' out of her with the quickness of that sort of talk," said he. "Let ye be tellin' me what it is ye have saved up there, the way I can see it put out in gold and silver pieces. Shure, 'tis then I might be thinkin' out what I could spare with her. Isn't it good money is goin' out of me pocket the day she'll be turnin' from this place and amn't I driven hard enough as it is with the bad crops I'd be havin' and the crool time for the farmers over the land is comin' to me? Yirra, there's little at all I can spare with herself. Isn't there money I'd be

paying out to the new hand I'd have to be gettin' in and wouldn't that be loss enough itself agin me?"

Fennel was listening so quietly that Kirwan pressed on with his words. He felt he was putting a sore case of hardship and putting it well and that it was not impossible he might persuade the fisherman to accept a merely nominal sum with Mary when he took her.

"'Tis a man like yeerself," he said with the oiled voice of flattery, "will be findin' it in ye to do the right thing be me with the sickness and want ye'd have in yeer heart for the girrl."

Fennel looked at him as he would have looked at a dog fish in his nets.

"I want no money with her at all," he said. "Haven't I plenty enough of me own?"

James Kirwan had never received such a surprise in his life. He did not know there were men like this in Ardnashiela or elsewhere in the world at all. The magnanimous generosity of it astounded him, yet it stirred no sense of gratitude. He was not carried to any answering impulse of bounty. He did not even offer the niggardly proposal of that purely nominal sum he had been fondling in his hopes. In the true conception of his nature, Fennel was a fool and having no respect in him for the folly of pride, he always took such advantage of it as he could. Yet it was nowhere within his policy to let any man see what a fool he thought him. That sort of folly did not thrive in exposed places. He sheltered it with the artificial heat of his approval and, changing the hold of his gun with an impulsive gesture, he offered the grip of his hand.

"Begor," said he, "didn't I know the first time I put me eyes on ye, 'twas an honest man ye were?"

Fennel took his hand.

"'Tis not—every man," Kirwan continued in a voluble

enthusiasm, "would say the like of what ye've pledged yeer word to now. There is not. Aren't they mean as bog-water in this place and there's not a man in it like yeerself has a shilling piece saved at the back of him, the time he could be standin' up with a pride in him like that."

To the fisherman this was all superfluous tackle. He had no want to be hearing the praise of James Kirwan or any man. There was a singleness of heart about him which no flattery could beguile. He took the hand that was offered, but felt this was all that was demanded of him. There was no appetite in him to be hearing he was an honest man. What he wanted to know he asked.

"Is it the way ye're givin' yeer word for her then?" he said, and the slight tremor of emotion there was in his voice sounded—like a bell tinkling in a far distance—in the farmer's ears. With a speedy cunning, he judged its significance. Not such a mere matter of formality was it to the fisherman after all as had seemed in the first temper of his speaking. He was not so sure of his bargain as all that.

James Kirwan had no idea in his nature of what love might be; but he knew men hungered and thirsted after women. And here surely was one thirsting now. In such a fever they were quick to make concessions, eager to give their souls away for the sake of their bodies. He had seen men like that over women. They were much as men who had drink taken; their senses were besotted with lust.

If Kirwan had any failing or weakness at all, it was for his card playing. He had never been drunk in his life, or in his life had he ever lusted after a woman. It gave him the shrewd powers of calculation to make use of it in another when it came his way.

Still gripping Fennel's hand, his eyes narrowed as he heard that tremor in his voice.

"Shure, I'll give me word—I will of course," said he,

"but what in the name of God am I to be doin' in the house with herself gone and no hand to be milkin' the cows, or makin' the butter or feedin' the chickens at all? Yirra, isn't it hard on a man, the years he'd be givin' a roof to the daughter of his house and good food to be eatin' and a soft bed for her sleep, the way she'd be taken on him and he left complainin' with the work on his hands. Shure the matrass she hev herself, didn't I buy it for thirty shillins in Doonvarna? And what will the good of that money be to me now with none to be sleepin' on it and meself called in from the fields to be milkin' the cows?"

Surely enough Fennel knew that he wanted something in return for his word over them. There was scarcely anything he was not ready to give, but searched blindly in his mind to know what it could be. For the gift of her was so near to him now, that all his timidity had come back with the close consciousness of it.

"Shure what can I do?" said he. "There's many a man has the same would be happenin' to him."

"Scarce wan there is," replied Kirwan, "would be losin' as good a girrl as meself. Would ye let her come and make the butter for me," he said suddenly, as though he had that moment thought of it and it provided a way out of all his difficulties. "And maybe just the two days in the week she'd be doin' that, 'tis milkin' the cows she might be or doin' anny little odd thing at all."

To one in Fennel's exaltation of joy it seemed a little thing to be giving his word for. So far as he could speak for himself, he said he would not mind if she came down sometimes to the farm and gave the help of her hands. He made no promise as to what she would say to it herself.

Kirwan agreed he could say nothing fairer than that. It was the man he was inclined to be doubtful about in this matter. With Fennel's promise to let her come, he had his

own ideas of his power over Mary. He had taken no notice of her saying that she hated him unless it were to convince him of the fear he knew she had of him in her heart. He believed by wheedling and alternate flashings of his temper, he could still get so much work out of her as would save him the expense of a paid hand.

This then was his bargain made, a better one than he had ever hoped for. Still holding the fisherman's hand as he had been doing for the last few minutes, he wrung it with a hearty grip and let it fall.

"Very well so," said he, "that's fair and square. Let ye be coming back now with me to the house and we'll be takin' a drop between us for the luck of it."

He picked up his gun and was just about to march up the headland of the field when his eyes caught the sight of a chaffinch settling on one of the stacks of barley. Its chirp ceased as it fell to its meal with the trustful effrontery of its kind.

"God blast those finches!" he exclaimed and flung up the gun to his shoulder and fired.

A little heap of fluttering feathers, of torn flesh riddled with shot and red with thick drops of blood, fell down into the stubble.

"That's emptied his crop," said he, and blew the smoke in a grey wreath out of the barrel of his gun.

X

KIRWAN'S was the only farm within a wide radius of Ardnashiela where they had machinery for the threshing. It was an antiquated contrivance relying upon horse power. Harnessed to two long shafts attached to a kind of windlass, the two animals walked round and round in a wide circle, treading a pathway that had long been beaten into a hard, bare track. This device connected with the flails and winnows in a barn close by behind the house. It was a slow process and, excepting that it saved the labour of men, little in advance of the flails worked by hand on the threshing floor.

Two days after Fennel had talked with the farmer in the barley field, the thrum of the old cogged wheels and the murmur of the flails in the barn was heard in Ardnashiela like the note of a corncrake across the still air. Kirwan had begun his threshing. The extra hands were called in—girls from the village, a man or two from neighbouring farms where they had no arable land and labour could be spared. From early morning till the light went as the sun drifted and drooped behind the headlands, there was a humming of life around the farm buildings. The throb of the thresher was its tuning key, vibrating in an endless note. Round and round to the unsparing whip in Kirwan's hand, the horses beat out their circle. In and out of the barn, like ants toiling, empty or laden with their pitchforked burdens of straw, the men came and went, came and went. With their shawls tightly fastened about their heads to keep the

dust out of their hair, the girls carried the fine dross of the cavell to a temporary stack behind the house.

Around and amongst this troupe of workers, a ring-master with the insignia of the whip, always ready in his hand for the tiring horses Kirwan moved with a sharp eye for indolence. His temper flashed out when he found it. He was paying wages and dared to abuse. The curses of God and the Mother of God he called down upon their sloth. The spittle bubbled at the corners of his mouth. Because they were receiving wages they went on with a momentary quickening of their movements. The blows that seemed imminent at every one of these outbursts never materialised. They settled down to the comparative stillness of the throbbing flails, the tread of the horses and men and the constant whispering rustle of the straw.

For three days it was the prevailing music about the farm and across the distance hummed with a muted note in every cottage in Ardnashiela. At the washing the women heard it through the splashing of the water in the tub. Still at the mending of his nets on the sea-wall, Fennel heard it too.

Every sound those days had a ring of joy in it to him, but none so loud or uplifting in his ears as that. It had all been settled that day at the farm but no one as yet had been told of it. With a feeling for ceremony where Fennel had none and Mary had seemed not unkindly indifferent, Kirwan had said he would announce it and drink their health in proper fashion the time they would be dancing on the floor of the house after the threshing.

Father Costello, the only man to whom the fisherman had wished to tell his good news, was not seen by him for any of those three days. He was in the village, but Fennel was too timid about the whole matter now it was settled to go and seek him out where he lived in the Main Street.

Kirwan had met him. Going out to Killanardrish to inform the Parish Priest and make arrangements for Mary's marriage, he had found Father Costello returning from a visit to Grange by the road that forks left to Doonvarna.

"Couldn't I tell ye a bit of news!" he called out before they met. "'Tis grand for the house itself, Father, is this day."

Father Costello nodded his head.

"Well—tell me what it is," said he.

With great praise he had to be saying for the virtues of Fennel, the farmer told him. He made a great match of it. She had got the best man in Ardnashiela, with the money he had saved and the steadiness he had for his work.

"The best man there is," Father Costello agreed.

"Shure, 'tis pounds and pounds he has up there in his cottage on the cliff road, the way he'll be able to put herself in a grand way of living."

The priest's eyes looked into Kirwan's.

"And the fine dowry," said he, "you'll be able to be giving her yourself."

The father shifted his look to the sky as though he feared the weather were changing for his threshing.

"Ah—well," said he, "shure I dunno what'll be settled yet. Isn't it takin' a hand away from me he is, the way I'd be losin' more money in a year than I can ever spare herself for a dowry. I dunno what'll be settled yet. Faith, there's no man in these parts will say I'm not generous with the little bit I'd have. There is not."

"You'll want all the generosity you've got," said the priest, "to be doing the right thing by her. When are they to be married?"

"I'm goin' out to see himself about that at Killanardrish now."

"And they all know about it in Ardnashieia?"

A look of gross mischief winked in the farmer's eyes.

"There's not a soul will know but yeerself and Father Roche till we'd be havin' the dancin' on the floor after the threshin'. Shure, if I give it that time, 'tis not another feast they'll be wantin' at all with the weddin'. 'Tis that way they'll be able to go quiet up to their own place for the grand night they'd be havin' with themselves and no waitin' till they're all drunk. Shure, isn't that pints of porter it'll be savin' me for I must give them a fling after the threshin'."

Father Costello stood there on the road and stared at him. He had not the emotion to be judging him fairly for just his meanness as a man. Disgust was in him. He could not hide it out of his face. Doubtless the farmer saw it, for in his eagerness to defend himself, he added,

"Shure, there's no harm in that. Won't a man is timid the way Fennel is, be glad of the quietness he'd be gettin' on his marriage night? He will of course. Yirra, can't I see with me both eyes, 'tis himself is achin' for her"—Father Costello turned away—"an' 'tis not a man is like that," Kirwan called after him, "would want to be wastin' his time steppin' round to a scratchy tune."

He stood there watching the departing figure of the priest, wondering what he had said to offend him, thinking how little good a man was to be understanding the plain ways of life once he had entered the Church.

"Will ye come yeerself to the dancin'?" he called out, "and 'twill be a grand thing, ye givin' them yer blessin' on the floor."

The priest half turned as he walked.

"I will not, thank you," he called back.

"Shure, p'raps there mightn't be so much porter drunk if ye was there yeerself!"

He did not answer. He did not look back again. Perhaps with the sound of his feet on the hard road he had not heard.

James Kirwan turned on his heel and continued his way to Killanardrish.

XI

THERE was a barrel of porter ordered from Creasy' for the feast after the threshing. They sat about on long forms in the kitchen, men and girls eating and drinking, in silence mostly with undivided attention, as though a free meal were an occasion that needed full justice done to it. A flitch of home-cured bacon had been boiled the day before. It was portioned out to them in greasy lumps. They held it with their fingers to the bread and ate them both together. Sometimes a piece slipped away on to the floor and was picked up, rubbed not infrequently with the sleeve of a coat, and then consumed.

The kitchen was filled with the sounds of eating and drinking, with the rancid odours of perspiration and the smell of porter that hangs heavily in the sweetest air. While the feast was going on, there was little that was gentle or human about them. There was greed in their eyes as they consumed their food. Glances shot here and there lest any one of them should not be ready when the plates of bacon and bread came round again. And when they did, shrewd eyes picked out the meatiest morsels, while hands were half lifted, waiting with unconcealed impatience for their turn.

None of them seemed to notice Fennel's presence amongst them, unless in a sort of resentment that he had done no work at the threshing and was an extra mouth to feed, delaying the plate or the jug of porter as it came round.

It was to their astonishment when the feast was nearly over and they could only have eaten more had it been thrust upon them, that James Kirwan stood up to his feet and

held aloft his glass of porter. A row of open mouths turned to him as they prepared to listen.

"Have ye all eaten yeerselves?" he began.

One or two of the men spoke up to say they had. The drooping lethargy of the rest answered for itself. There was no longer any quickness of movement amongst them. Their eyes turned sluggishly with the surfeit of food. But their imaginations were sharp enough to quicken to the sense that something unexpected was about to happen.

"Have ye all got a drop of porter in yeer glasses?" Kirwan continued. They had. So long as it was a drop only he made no offer to fill them.

Hoping that more was to be given him, one of the men swallowed hastily what he had and held up his empty glass.

"I could take a drop here," he called out.

With eyes that seemed to be seeing nothing and with her limbs moving as they move who walk in their sleep, Mary brought the jug to him and filled his glass.

Fennel snatched one glance at her. It was timid and nervous he thought she was, like himself. They knew what was about to happen. In such little talk as he had had with her since that day in the yard, she had shown nothing but the quietness of consent. That had satisfied him. It was human enough in him and would have been in any man, to be easily dissuaded from his magnanimous offer to set her free from her word. She had continued in her consent. That was enough to him. He was unable to recognise in it the tragedy of submission. With that swift glance, he looked no more.

"Now," said Kirwan, "I've a grand health itself for ye to be drinkin'. Thanks be to God we've got the corn in, and shure the Lord Himself knows 'tis no fine crop on land is starvin' the like of this, for 'tis not the floors of Heaven we're standin' on, but the land of Ireland—God help us! But faith, if there's no fine crop I have to be shoutin' about,

there's a better thing has happened me. Will ye drink the porter out of yeer glasses to Joe Fennel, the fisherman himself, that has asked the word from Mary, the daughter of the house."

She heard the moment's pause of silence, then the laughter and the voices confusing each other with their congratulations closed in about her ears and were like sounds of the sea when the winter storms were flinging it up onto her father's land. She knew that the hands of the girls were taking her hands and smacking her on the shoulders, for there were few of them there had not thought of Fennel for themselves and none without the pride in that company to conceal it.

She knew she was smiling at those about her. A self in her—that self they would one day be taking up to lie under the grass in the graveyard on the hill—had already begun the automatic performance of those duties it would from this onward be her calling to obey. They whispered things in her ears, the ones who knew her best, as they clung about her. It was perhaps her fortune that she did not hear them. The confusion of it all and just the realisation that it was all inevitable now blunted her senses.

One clear impression only shot with a piercing vividness into her mind. In the midst of all that clamour of laughter and talk, she caught sight of her mother in the chimney corner, looking on at it all with an inscrutable smile that played about her lips only and had no confirmation of pleasure or satisfaction in her eyes.

With no subtlety of insight it seemed to Mary as though her mother were looking on at a familiar scene, none of the meaning of which was hidden from her. In that smile she felt there was pity, amusement, and a certain bitterness, but nothing of joy. In all that crowd of people, she, it appeared to Mary, was the only one who was not deceived by the

jollity of the occasion. Like Mary herself, she seemed aloof and outside it all and with nothing but a relentless loneliness that had made her what she was.

With that smile, it was as though in so many words she were saying in a silence to herself, "Women are beasts like the cattle in the yard—'tis only times of sale maybe they'd have the passin' joy of a few ribbands in their hair while the chains 'ud be fastened round them."

And when it was this she saw, Mary's heart cried out in dumb sounds to the thought of the priest—the look in his eyes that day on the rocks, the sound of anger in his voice and his going that very night to Fennel, urging him to be swift in getting her word.

It was true he had hinted there was another man. There was! There always would be! All her life long she would remember that morning and her pain as she lay afterwards alone upon the rocks.

If pain was all life had, then it was pain she wanted. To be hurt deep down into her soul would be better than this submission to content. It seemed no pain was greater than she could bear, if only it was a real pain, cutting, excruciating, wounding her to death if it must.

The cry of those dumb sounds were upon the edge of her lips when the blind man struck up the tune upon his fiddle and they were all hurrying to clear the floor for the dancing. Then the smile she had that was set about her mouth, turned into a shrill laugh. She found she was dancing with the boldest of the men amongst them who had caught her by the waist and was muttering into her ear what a lucky fellow was Fennel, the fisherman, to be having the word from her that day.

They all called out to him to let go his arm of her for that it was Fennel himself she ought to be stepping the first dance with. Yet he still clasped her till Mary slipped from

him and stood there on the floor, waiting for the fisherman to take her.

"Ah, shure, let her go on," he muttered in a pain of confusion. "There's never a step I danced in me life and 'tis sooner I'd be watchin' herself with her feet movin' to the tune than meself stampin' the way I'd be goin' on to it."

It was early in the evening and they let him have his way then because they all knew he was a timid man and had never been seen at the cross-road or dancing in any place at all.

So she was swept again into the swirl of them and there were some girls whispering it was a poor manner he was taking the joy that was coming to him and wasn't Mary herself too light in her heart, the way she was dancing, for the likes of him.

Even James Kirwan himself, who had no ear for a tune, seized a girl round the middle and flung her out into the dancing, for he was in a good humour, counting the money he had saved without giving Mary her bounty.

From one tune to another the blind man plied his fiddle, whether they were dancing or the men were drinking in the heat of the room or whatever they were doing. If for an instant he stopped to put fresh grip of resin to his bow, it was Mary first who called out to him to be going on. The sound of a fiddle at all times leapt quickly in her blood. It was witchcraft to her now. She gave her feet to madness in the measure of it. She laughed aloud when they flung her round. If she looked at Fennel at all, it was with her eyes bright and fevered in which he saw nothing but laughter and wondered was there ever a man like himself to be taking so young a girl into his home.

In the midst of it suddenly there was one man with her who stopped and said he would dance no more till himself and herself had had their step on the floor. There were

many of them had drink taken by then and whether they were glad to be sitting down or not, the idea caught their fancy. Some of them left their partners at once and sat down to be making room on the floor.

"Shure what the hell does it matter," the man called out, "can he dance or not? 'Tis herself can dance well enough for the both of them and 'tis not at a wake he is, sittin' there with his hands in the gap of his legs!"

She was laughing still as she came to him and lifted him to his feet, still unwilling and protesting pathetically. But the laughter that was never in her heart went out of the light of her face as the blind man stopped his jigging tune and, lifting his bow again, began one of his minor melodies of Ireland that have little step to them but music of a heart would be wandering through the waste land of the bogs, climbing sometimes with a far-off laughter amongst the bent thorn trees on the hills, then on again, still wandering through the glens.

"In the name of God let ye be playin' a smarter tune than that!" James Kirwan called out.

"He will not!" cried Mary. "Let him play the tune would be comin' to him. 'Tis easier it is for one would not be havin' the way of his steps."

They were all sitting down. It was Mary and Fennel alone who were dancing. She moved her steps so simply that it was not hard for him to be moving with her. Not one of them in all the room was laughing at them then, for the music of the fiddle had got into their ears and the sadness of Ireland was in it and there was not one of them, however far gone he was in drink, but knew there was death and a strange wandering at the end of all things.

To Mary herself in her ears, the sadness was the sound of that other self that was calling her. And she knew in some dream her mind was in, she could never leave the arms

that held her. But as long as the voice was calling her out of the notes of the blind man's fiddle, she was content to go on dancing there, with Fennel's hand gripped at her waist and her head near against his shoulder.

So they were dancing, stepping it alone in all the room, with the others sitting round on the forms, some nodding their heads to the plaint of it, some tapping their feet to the tune, when the door opened into the farmer's kitchen and Father Costello stood there with the night behind him.

As if there were a spell over all of them, they made no disturbance of greeting. Softly he closed the door behind and stood there while the dance went on. When they passed close to him for the first time, he forced himself to look at Mary and over the breadth of Fennel's shoulder as she moved by, her eyes fell into his.

XII

THE blind man was sitting on the table. His legs were swinging in the air as he played and his heels knocking to the beat of the tune. When their dance was finished and the greetings of the priest were done with as they were called out by one or another and made much of in his pride by Kirwan himself, Father Costello drew away from the rest of them and took the blind man's customary seat in the recess of the chimney.

"Well—this is a great night for you," he said across the peat fire to Mrs. Kirwan.

She nodded her head as the fiddle started up again and the noise of the heavy feet scraped and the light feet tapped on the floor. There was a weariness in her eyes now as though the heat of the room and the sound of the music and voices could lift her to pity or amusement no more. Even the smile that Mary had seen was gone, the bitterness that was in her, tired. She raised herself to her feet as a woman that is old.

"'Tis a grand night it is indeed," she echoed him, "for those would have no knowin' what there'd be for them in sleep."

"Faith, 'tis not going to your bed you are!"

"I am so."

She moved quietly out of the chimney corner onto the floor at the fringe of the passing girls and men.

"Shure, they won't let you go till 'tis all over."

She smiled then. It was like a smile on the lips of a mask, but the eyes that were behind it looked into his own.

They told him he knew well it was only words he said and that when there is young blood quick and hot in young veins it was not a woman going to her sleep they would be noticing one way or another.

They brushed against her and jostled her as they went by, but not one of them saw her leaving them. It was when she was gone and Father Costello heard the door out of the room close behind her, that he knew what it was she had said to him.

"It's a grand night indeed," he said over to himself, "for those would have no knowing what there'd be for them in sleep."

Then he tried to look at the dancing, yet never at Mary herself. The men and the girls began to float rather than dance in their movement before his eyes. The tune of the fiddle beat to a pulse in his head as though the bow with its resin were scraping backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards against his brain. The odour of the men and women and the smell of the porter, that had been a stench to him when first he came in from the sweet night outside, had passed the sense of his nostrils and lay heavily like a dead weight, aching upon his mind.

He knew his reasons for coming, but he began to wonder why he had obeyed them at all. The heat of the room was stifling him and then a whiff of smoke from the peat fire with its dry, clean aromatic scent, came across his senses. It reminded him of incense. The music of High Mass, as he had heard it in the cathedrals abroad, floated by him, above and beyond the sound of the fiddle. With a deep breath of it, he dragged his thoughts away from their spell of lethargy and told himself he was glad he had come and that he had all the strength of ideals a man needed, if he could face the danger to his soul as he was facing it there.

With the courage of that thought in him, he dared to

look straight at Mary as she went by. He thought there was a calmness in his eyes. He did not know how eagerly they stared and his heart dropped to a beat of sickness and fear when he saw her whisper a word to her partner and leave him there standing on the floor to find his way back to the place where he had been sitting.

She threaded her way through the dancers and came across to the fire, taking the seat where her mother had been and, with eyes that still had fever in them, looking across the fire at him.

"Why did ye come?" she asked.

He could not judge from her voice whether she were glad or sorry that he had. His courage was gone again. It seemed to drift out of him, to be burnt in the fire and, charred and light, like the ashes of paper, to be borne away with the heat and the blue smoke up into the black cavern of the chimney.

He tried to tell her the real truth, his first reason, the reason of his spirit, that unless he could see her there in the arms of the man who had chosen her and without fear, he had known there would be no more courage in him again. He tried to say that. The words seemed to come boldly to the very edge of his lips. But they were not the words he said.

"It was two days ago—what your father said to me on the road."

"What did he say?"

"'Perhaps there mightn't be so much porter drunk,' he said to me, 'if ye were there yerself.'"

With no hesitation or doubt, she knew why her father had said that. At any other time she would have laughed at it, but now she sought only to learn how it had brought him

there. When he would not answer the question there was in her eyes, she asked him.

"I knew you didn't like a man with much drink taken," he said, "I knew it was ugly you'd find it, if they were rowdy and dirty in their drink. I just thought—that was all—if I came—"

He had thought all that. It was true what he said, but he had never meant to tell her this. If there was anything he had wished to show her that night, it was that there was the full spirit of courage in him to put her away; to let her understand, without the words of it, that if she had known what his look upon her bare arm had meant that day, or divined the meaning of the anger he had had in his voice, there was notwithstanding no lasting power in her to find the weakness in him again.

Yet this was what he had said and she was there begging him for a closer explanation of his words. Still weaker in him than all, he had given it her.

When he looked up at her from speaking across the smoke of the fire, her eyes were leaden and heavy with tenderness and there was a sullen look of passion, almost to sulkiness, about her lips.

"Go back and dance," he muttered. "Go back."

Without another word or look at him, she got up and went out into the midst of them and presently he heard her laugh above the voices of the others. It passed through him, burning and searing as it went. He leapt up quickly to his feet. It was beyond his endurance to stay there longer. There was not a man dancing on the floor, with all the drink that had been going, but had the senses clearer in him than this.

It was as he stood up that an old clock on the dresser struck the hour of midnight and ushered in the Friday morning of the new day.

Whether this was a contrivance of Kirwan's or not, beginning his threshing on the Tuesday so that the entertainment should be on the Thursday, it certainly was into a fast day they had danced and drunk and eaten themselves. The priest was there. This it was perhaps what the farmer had meant when he said there was less porter would be consumed.

The sounds of the fiddle died away. The scratching and the tapping of the feet ceased. Their threshing feast was over.

The very first to go was Fennel. It was sadly enough he had felt out of his element all that evening and knew the chaff and laughter they would heap upon him walking back along the strand to Ardnashiela. With a hurried word of parting and a deep breath as he held her hand, he had left Mary and slipped out of the door. She could not tell with what emotion it was she had let him go. She had not offered to keep him, yet in a vague apprehension wished he had not gone.

When her father heard he had departed and in his absence blasphemed and swore it was a poor way to be leaving a girl on the last note of the tune; when with some of the men he too went out to see could they overtake or call him to bring him back for the priest's blessing on them both; when, one by one, the men flung on their hats and the girls tossed their shawls over their heads, having the jest of a word or a laugh to give Mary as they went out, she began to know what her apprehensions had been.

They were leaving her alone with the priest. He saw the approach of it, yet could not move. There was no stability in any intention now that came into his mind. A moment before he could stay no longer. Now he could not force himself to go away.

Seeing the approach of it too, she stood near the door as they went out, her smile coming and going as they passed

her. And when they were all gone, with no apparent volition, but as if she had been told to do so, she shut the door. There was the blind man still there. He could not save them from each other's eyes, but the speech she had feared, and the sound of the priest's words and the vibrations in her heart his voice made whenever she heard it now, she was safe from these.

It was still at the doorway she was standing and the silence was throbbing with the beat of her pulse. He knew as well it was not that way they could endure it much longer. As well with her, he looked to the presence of the blind man to save them. There he still sat on the table beside his fiddle and the glass of porter they had given him. Still swinging his legs and clacking his heels, he was humming over the tunes he had played with a melancholy in his voice as though he were loth to leave them.

"What was that slow tune you were playing, blind man?" asked Father Costello with any words that came first to him to say. "Where did it come from? I never heard it before."

"Shure I've played thirrty tunes this night and wasn't there a time itself to all of them?"

Mary knew well which tune he meant. Seeking no confirmation for the instinct she had, she told him it was that her father had called to him to cease playing.

He took up his fiddle at once and played the first snatch of it.

"That's the one," said Father Costello. "Where did you learn that tune?"

The blind man raised his chin from the instrument and stared with his eyes out into the room.

"'Twas one night I heard that," he whispered, "high away and alone in the hills of Galway."

"How was it you heard it there?"

"'Twas in the wind I heard it and the shiverin' of the heather—in the brown water was creepin' under the moss and the long cry of hoverin' birds over the grey crags of the rocks."

"You mean you made it yourself?"

"I did not. 'Twas with the both of me ears I heard it. Weren't They playin' it in the long blue drift of the lonesome light and 'twas Their feet steppin' it on the stones, I heard meself. And may God and all His saints and the Holy Mother herself leave me alone in me darkness if that's not the truth I'm tellin' ye now."

With an instant's tremor that seemed to pass through him, like a wind chilling his blood, he snatched the fiddle again to his chin and began to play it from the beginning, and, when he had once started, continued muttering in his breath,

"Let me hear the feet—let me be hearin' them, I'm sayin'. Let me hear the feet."

Father Costello had kept his eyes away from Mary till then. Now he looked and she felt it was not only he that was asking her what she would do, but the voices that had been calling to her all the night, lifting themselves to warn yet urge her on. She knew as her feet began to move upon the floor it was into flames and the torture of pain they were taking her and when she looked up to find his eyes upon her still, it brought her no astonishment when she saw him leave where he was standing and come down the room to her side. It seemed they both had known it would be so as soon as the blind man had begun to play.

With a fainting gesture of compliance, she let him put his arm about her and held him droopingly to move with her as she moved to the sound of the fiddle that might have been playing as it had played to the blind man in the height of the hills, so far away did it sound to both of them.

Once they crossed the floor and then she felt her head leaning forward against him. Sweet noises had come into her ears, that were not the fiddler's tune, but like the song of a voice other than her own in an ecstasy of joy. And always as she leant nearer, she knew his head was lowering to meet hers. She looked up. A faint wind that was cold out of another world blew over her eyelids. She saw his eyes that seemed to be taking her own into them. Then she knew that what would happen was more than she could bear to see. Her eyes closed as his lips came nearer and leant upon her own. It seemed to her then no more than that she just went away, out of that kitchen where they were, out of the world itself, to where there was nothing but a darkness. A moment she saw him and then she could see him no more. The blind man was still playing his fiddle with his feet swinging and his heels clacking as Mary Kirwan slipped with her weight out of Father Costello's arms.

When James Kirwan returned he found them patting her hands and sprinkling her face with water from the earthenware jug that stood always in a corner in the coolest part of the room.

XIII

MRS. SHEEHAN happened to be in the kitchen premises at Killanardrish that Friday morning when the bell rang. The kitchen was her sanctuary. Every other room in the house, except that expressly occupied by the Parish Priest, was as a tower to her upon the battlements. From all quarters she could watch those who approached the castle where she kept her charge. It was in her judgment and discretion alone to raise the portcullis of that hall door and give admission to those who wished to see her master.

From his room overlooking the fields sloping down to the sea, Father Roche could neither hear the bell nor was he likely, from that direction, to see any one approaching the house. Once in Killanardrish he was sequestered from the outside world and like a sentinel, never sleeping at her post, though not always upon the ramparts, Mrs. Sheehan kept watch over her lord.

It was always a cause of annoyance to her when the bell rang while she was in the kitchen. From the kitchen, which looked out into an enclosed backyard, she could see nothing. It was still more aggravating that from no window in the front of the house—unless indeed she opened one and looked out—could she see who was standing at the front door. Some vein of caution and inherent secretiveness in her nature had always rebelled against such a measure as this. She never wished to appear unready for these attacks upon her master's privacy.

Filled with suspicion and shod in slippers that made no

sound, she approached the door in that chill and lofty hall. Not until her fingers, accustomed to silence, were fully prepared upon the handle, did she turn it and open the door, not with violence but always so suddenly that the visitor outside upon the step was always unprepared.

She took a secret, acid pleasure in the sight of the invariable surprise that appeared upon their faces. She felt that the advantage of their silent approach was then lost to them and that her own position as guardian was still secure.

There was a sharp resentment in her mind that morning when she opened the door in this manner and was confronted by the back of Father Costello in which there was no symptom of surprise or registration of any feeling whatsoever. He turned slowly and with a stare that was in his eyes, making her feel as though she scarcely existed at all, he asked her if Father Roche were in the house.

"He's in the house," she replied.

"I want to see him."

"I dunno whether 'tis at his meditations he is. There'd be sometimes he'd be readin his Breviary now."

"Does he mind you coming into the room to him?"

A smile of any nature was not in the gamut of expressions peculiar to Mrs. Sheehan's face. What might have been a smile of superiority in another twisted itself in her features then.

"Shure, he doesn't mind meself, anny time," she said.

"Then go and tell him I want to speak to him."

She had never felt herself mastered before and it was not so much Father Costello himself, but something as it were about and beyond him that compelled her without another word to do as she was bid.

The old man was sitting in the same position, in the same chair, in which he had talked to Fennel, as Father Costello was ushered into the high-ceilinged room.

With all the soulless drought and jealous acidity of her nature, Mrs. Sheehan had never felt the temptation of listening at a door in her life. For some reason, utterly inexplicable to herself, she felt it then. As she always did, she had closed the door so quietly. She heard the noiselessness of her slippered feet as she walked away. They would never know if she turned back and, with the service of eye and ear at the keyhole, kept watch and listened.

The sudden assault of the temptation shook her in fear of herself. She had never feared herself before. Blood she had never felt in her veins rushed astoundingly with a flame into her cheeks. She almost ran to the kitchen. She was plucking a fowl for Father Roche's dinner. Each feather she pulled out she found to be a pain in herself and snatched at it viciously to make the hurt the more.

Father Costello came down the room into the light of the window and stood black against the fields and the sea as the old man looked up.

"If there's trouble in Ardnashiela," said he, "don't play with yeer words on it, but have it right out. They're a drinkin' lot, and there's not one man wouldn't cut the throat of another if 'twas a bit of land he wanted for himself."

"Well—I don't find them like that," said Father Costello.

"Don't ye! Is it four months ye've been there?"

"It is—not quite."

"I've been Parish Priest and in this house twenty-five years. And I'll die in it, if Mrs. Sheehan'll let me. Four years ago there was a farmer near Grange had a man come behind his back, biddin' privately for a bit of land the farmer wanted to get in the open market. Did ye hear at all what he did?"

Father Costello shook his head.

"He waited for him behind a hedge with the gun he had shootin' rabbits and when the man came along the road, up

stands me fine fella and empties the shot out of his gun into his face the way it looked like a sieve with his blood pourin' out of the holes in it. Ye didn't hear that?"

"I did not."

"Ye've only been four months in the place. Did ye hear tell the way they burnt a woman in Kilkenny for a witch?"

"I heard that long ago when I was a young boy."

"D'ye know they'll cut the horns off of the cows the way they'd be bleedin' to death and the tits off their udders for fear the man that owned them might be gettin' milk to put in his mouth?"

"I have—I've heard that."

"Well—now let ye be tellin' me in plain words the trouble there is in Ardnashiela."

"There's no trouble like that."

"The Lord be thanked! They're gettin a civilised lot these last four months. What is it so?"

The old man's eyebrows pricked out like brushes in a shield over his pale eyes, as he looked up at his curate.

"I want ye to let me go away for a few days—a week or so—just for a little while."

Father Roche closeded the scrutiny in his eyes.

"Is it the way time's got to seem like a piece of elastic to ye? Shure, if ye can stretch a few days into a week or so, God knows what it'll be when it becomes a little while."

"'Tis the way I don't know quite how long I want to be away. It's ill I'm feelin'." His voice was threatening with the note of desperation. "It's no good me comin' back till I'm well again and can go on with me duties. I can't do them as I'm feelin' now."

He stood looking out of the window, down the fields and over the sea and through all the despair that was in him he could feel the mind of the Parish Priest about his own mind

like a dog blindly sniffing and scenting for a trail that had gone from it.

"There are two good doctors in Doonvarna," said Father Roche presently, "though please God I'll die without the need of 'em—if Mrs. Sheehan'll let me."

"A doctor couldn't do me any good."

"Why not?"

"It's a change I want."

"From what?"

"Faith I don't know. Perhaps this place is lonely. It's oppressing me. I feel desperately depressed sometimes."

"Ye've been here four months?"

"Oh, sure I know that sounds no time at all to be feeling the weight of a place on you."

"Twenty-five years is longer," said Father Roche.

"Ah, but surely you must have felt the desolation of it at first."

"I did."

"Well—didn't you feel you wanted to get away?"

"From the place?"

"Shure, what else?"

"Yirra, I might have felt I wanted to get away from meself."

In the silence that came between them then, Father Costello could feel the pale eyes watching behind him.

"'Tis not places or people," Father Roche went on presently in a slow voice, "would be makin' this or that in a man's life, but the way himself 'ud be lookin' at 'em. Glory be to God, sure I've come that way meself. I can look at nothin' at all and if a circus was to come into that field there now, I dunno would I see was it elephants or camels they had to be drawin' the cars."

Father Costello turned round on him, keeping, but no more, the cry of desperation out of his voice.

"What d'ye mean by all this?" he asked. "Shure, I can't understand you. Will you give me leave to go away or won't you? I know it's heaping work on your shoulders but you must believe me or not, I wouldn't ask if I didn't want."

For a long measure of time they stood looking far into each other's eyes. There was no fear in Father Costello's of the pointed scrutiny in every expression on Father Roche's face. He opposed and held it out with all the despairing in his own.

When the Parish Priest had looked and looked and seen no more than the full years of his life had given him a shrewdness of, he turned with a glance over his shoulder.

"Would ye like to turn the key in that door," said he quietly, "and make yeer confession here in the room?"

A thousand times the heart of the priest in Father Costello could have cried out in his gratitude for that. It would cleanse his soul he felt to be smirched with all the thoughts his mind had flung before it since the night before. But something that was instinctive man in him rose uppermost to keep his love and the passion of it a secret and a sacred thing in him till of himself he could burn it out of his heart.

"I would not," he said and said it so quietly and with such conviction in his voice, that the old priest asked no more.

With a shrug of his shoulders and a meeting together of the tips of all his fingers, he looked up at his curate.

"Ye can go to-morrow," said he, "I'm not stoppin' ye. But mind ye, 'tis more afraid ye'll be to come back. No—no—go to-morrow. If ye can't meet fear—ye can't meet God on the last day."

XIV

IN a bewilderment, leaving nothing in her consciousness but dull pain, Mary had lived through that night and passed into the next day. It had been a mercy to her if her fainting had held her in the place of her darkness till the next morning, but before the priest had left, they had brought her round. She lay all night with hot eyes staring and waiting for the dawn, her body shaken with sudden gusts of trembling, her voice sometimes whispering a cry—"Oh—oh—" the inarticulate voice of her pain.

In the morning she rose early to her work. The cows were milked betimes. Kirwan looked at her once with calculating eyes. She was pale as a shroud. But she was always pale. Women were unaccountable cattle. The dancing had excited her. It was that way she had fainted. If she could get up early to her work, when, from all he had seen of his wife, women were like animals the way they loved their beds, there could be little that was wrong with her. He did not look again.

All that day, she moved from one duty to another absorbed and silent. When her mother heard what had happened the night before, she asked her why she had fainted.

"Shure, I dunno," said Mary.

"There's never a woman does," Mrs. Kirwan replied. "Wisha, if she did maybe she'd know the way to be healin' it."

Alternately Mary was hoping that Fennel would not come to see her that day—then that he would. Even when she heard the iron gate swing that evening at sunset and saw

him walking up the cobbled path to the door of the house, she did not know whether she was grateful or not for his coming. It must have been grateful she was, for, watching him there from one of the sheds in the yard, she called to him. He turned with an eager movement and there was joy in his face as he crossed the yard and went into the shed to her.

If he was to hear about her fainting the night before, it was not herself was going to tell him. She stood, just with her arms at her side and, always in gratitude for his gentleness but in greater pity for him now because of her own pain, she had a smile on her lips to greet him with.

It was the greatest tenderness she felt for him that in his timidity and the simple emotions that ruled his mind, he had never sought to embrace her yet. Knowing now what passion was, she knew that somewhere it must exist in him. He was a man. It was therefore with an intuitive sense she felt the presence of the wonder he must have for her. A year, a few months before, she might have given out of her heart to the strangeness and beauty of that and marvelled at finding it in a man of her class. It would indeed have been a revelation to her. But a greater revelation had begun to unveil itself in the depths of her nature before ever she had met the fisherman. And now she knew wonder that was not timid as in a man kneeling before the altar of the Mother of God, but fierce and subjugating with rushing sounds of pain and sweeping visions of joy.

She smiled at him. Even she held out her hand. There was just one thing the oppressive fear that was in her wanted to ask him. She said it then as he took her hand and before he could speak.

"When is it we're goin' to be married?"

His eyes could do no more than stare back at hers. Not

only had she become willing. She was eager now. It was not too deaf he was to hear that in her voice.

"What makes ye so kind to me?" he asked, with words he found difficult to urge from his throat to the clear sound of them on his lips.

"'Tis not kind I am!" she cried then.

He did not understand.

"'Tis the greatest kindness ever I had in me life. Haven't I been the way of a net and it drifting empty in the water and isn't it full now out of the deep places of the seas and I drawin' it into meself with the power I'd have in me arms?"

This was the simple native poetry in him, strangely vivid with all their coarseness and cruelty in them all. By the hand he held, he drew her gently towards him as he said it.

"We'll be married," he muttered, "as soon as the priest is ready for us," and then stammering in his shyness, he asked her was it the way she could kiss him, for it was himself had never felt the lips of a woman in his life.

In a still obedience to his asking, she turned her face upwards and he kissed her, but it was not his kiss she felt.

This was the first time he had ever kissed a woman. He could not have believed how strange it was. Her lips were cold as a stone you'd pick out of the water and she seemed to have no breath.

XV

THERE was one determination Mary had firmly made. She would not go near Ardnashiela again until the day she was to be married. In some orthodox and conventional concept of thought, she believed this ceremony was to save her from the danger that threatened from every corner of her mind.

The sense of desecration and profanity there had once seemed to be about her because Father Costello was a priest, compelled no longer with reality. That moment when his arm was around her and his lips had left his breath on her lips, there was no thought that was unholy or sacreligious in her mind. She had felt no horror at what had happened. She had felt no shame when they had brought her round and she remembered it all to the slightest detail of sensation.

It must not be. It could not be. But she had no shame in her now. In all the chill bleakness of her life, there were moments of exultant joy in that kiss he had given that warmed her. She knew well how barren her life was to be, yet the remembrance of that one moment alone seemed to give her strength to face it all. She had no regret of it—no remorse. In a passionate defiance of all subservient obedience to the teaching of the Church, she swore to herself she would never confess it. It was hers—hers and his—and as long as she breathed or had a tongue to speak with, the secret of it would be a joy to keep.

But until she was married, she dared go no more to Ardnashiela. Apart from this, which no longer she felt

to be a sin, it would have been her duty to go in to Confession the next day. She would not go.

Instead, that evening, when the milking was finished, the cream skimmed from the pans in the dairy and the buckets cleaned, she crossed the fields to the Doonvarna road because it had become a greater pain to her to stay in the house. All through the warm and peaty atmosphere in that kitchen, she could still hear the notes of the fiddle playing and the sound of the priest's voice when he spoke; she could see that last look his eyes had before she had gone away into the darkness, she could feel the quick heat of his breath on her lips that had carried her into that world beyond the immediate perception of pain.

It was nine miles to Doonvarna. Two miles beyond Ard-nashiela Bay, the road, doubly rutted with lines of the cart tracks and the wheel marks of the donkey butts, led through the lonely marsh-land of the bogs. There in the Spring, the muffled drum of the snipe sounded often to those who did not know the ways of birds, like the drums of the faerie armies marching out to battle in the glens of the hills of Doon. All the year and long through the winter nights, the curlews called their sharp cries of fear, their quick cries of warning and that long, low moaning whistle of their content.

She passed the road that forks to Killanardrish. Without a thought of how far she was going or any consideration of time, she went on across the peat bog where the only signs of human life were the solitary stacks of peat to show where the hands of men had been and the sharp incisions in the bog itself where pools of black, brown water trapped the last lights of the fallen sun and delayed them there in smears of purple, of orange and of gold.

There was nothing of any beauty that she saw over those dark wastes of land in the still lights of evening. Beyond

and before her, the grey hills of Doon called her to them like a voice calling.

It is a sign of madness, they say, that wish to be alone. Before the fatal rabies siezes upon its victim, a dog will hide away in dark places and wander upon far, solitary journeys. If that is so, then it was love madness that was calling Mary Kirwan up into the hills. She paid no heed to the creeping grey lights that followed the warm lights and mingled with them in purple across the sky. It was the long twilight of evening that was closing around her as she left the marsh land and the rising shadows of the hills began to deepen the pale thread of the road. None of these signs of the passage of time were apparent to her. There was night already in her heart. It could not well grow darker there.

Through that pass of the hills, the road wound upwards for a mile and more before, mounting the lowest crest, it began to descend in tortuous twistings to Doonvarna and the sea again. It was known always as the Gap. There is scarcely a word having a lonelier sound to it than that in all of Ireland.

Once there had been a man or a woman maybe, who had faced the solitariness of night and day between the gloom of those crags and fallen boulders where the sun never shines for more than a short hour. They may have faced it out to the end. Like a waiting beast it may have leapt upon them in a dark night before the end had come. All that remained in desolate vision of their life there were the broken four walls of the cabin still standing away from the roadside. The thatch was nearly rotten through. It clung in places to the remaining rafters as rags hang upon the bones of an old woman in whom all life is dead and only death alive.

With no sense of the forsaken tragedy of its solitude, Mary passed it by with a look that saw no more than what all

can see upon any road in Ireland. It roused no drifting speculation in her. She had no picture in her mind of those who had struggled against life there, had failed and gone away. There was little in the sight of those crumbling walls, the sightless windows and the gaping black mouth where the door had hung that was so different or strange to life as she knew it then acutely in herself. Up the hill of the road she walked on into the first grey promise of the night that was gathering out of the sea beyond Doonvarna.

Before she reached the crest of the Gap, four miles away then from Ardnashiela, a mist rolled over the hills in grey sheets of suspended moisture and tumbled down in thick, wet, sullen layers into the valley of the pass.

She had no time to reckon upon the result of its coming. In a few moments it was close around her, shutting her in and bringing sounds to her ears she had not heard before in the clear light. In these mists that came up often from the sea, people had been lost all night in the hills. She felt no fear because of that. There was the road. She had only to keep to it and she could not lose her way. It did no more than bring her to a consciousness of how far she had come and that it would be well into the night before she could hope to get home.

That mattered little. There was enough dull sanity of purpose in her to know that sometime or another she must get back. Without pause to calculate how long it would take her in the uncertainty of that light, she turned at once and set her face back towards Ardnashiela. For no more than a few yards before her the road lay at her feet. After that it ended in the mist and might have been the sharp edge of an abyss. So intense the silence was about her, that when a stone tumbled down the side of the hills, she stood listening to the sharp sounds of it till it lay still.

Perhaps it was a quarter of a mile she had walked with watchful steps when a low wind came up, companion of the mist. It stole with soft murmurs by her ears, hurrying the grey layers of moisture past her as she walked. They came after a time to be like ghosts to the quickening of her imagination—ghosts hastening by her, heedless of her as she walked, but brushing their cold scarves against her face and making almost a whisper in the air as they went, so bodily their shapes began to be. Each one seemed to bring the faint burden of a fear in its arms as it swept by. More and more as she walked they left a sense of fear in her heart when they were gone.

She knew at last she was afraid and that it was death, not an ordinary death, she was beginning to fear, but death coming to her there alone and holding its cold fingers violently at her throat. It pictured itself at last in a concrete vision in her mind. She saw Shaughnessy, the butcher, killing his sheep in the solitude of the room, when the door was closed upon him in that cottage of his in Ardnashiela. She saw him wrestling with it, wearing the grim smile she always knew must be on his face. Now, as she walked along the road, she saw herself like that sheep, struggling, and if there could only have been the warmth of her blood flowing, she would not have felt death so cold or so alone. But though she knew it was with a knife, a sharp, pointed knife, Shaughnessy stabbed the necks of the sheep he killed, it was not in that manner she saw death then. There was chill in it and violence as when in drowning the body must struggle and fight in the cold water. And permeated through all this vision was the sense of the inevitable sacrifice, the powerless beast and she, no less, herself, both dedicated sacrament to the needs of life.

She began to feel she was fighting against death there in the clinging darkness of that mist. Any moment she be-

lieved it might leap in some form upon her from the roadside. There seemed no reason at all to be quickening her steps, for the sense of it was always there as the ghosts shuffled by her, yet she was breaking now almost into a run. The very sound of her feet as they grew to haste, clattered on the road as though they were clattering against her brain. Terror was pursuing her now, swift terror, more relentless than fear, and faster than her feet could run.

She knew at last there were screams hiding in her voice—demons of her fear which, once they thrust their way between her lips, would make the cries of madness and then the end. The death that was terrifying would be upon her. She fought to keep them back. If she kept them back she believed she could defy that death, outrun it and escape.

Nearer and nearer to her lips they came and faster and faster as she ran, the ghosts of the mists slipped by, when suddenly out of the deepening darkness, she heard a sound. There was no judging in that demented world she was moving in what sound it was. With eyes staring and lips open, she stood, feet set apart, waiting on the road as it came towards her. It grew, like a giant out of the mist. In a solid volume of real substance it heaped itself upon her out of the rushing shapes of the ghosts.

It was a man. He was riding a bicycle. The cries hung, held on her lips. There was a real world. She stood and laughed.

Scarcely an instant's laughter it was. He had stumbled more than dismounted from his bicycle. When she looked with sight that was concentrated on more than the mere presence of him come there out of the mist, it was Father Costello she saw. She stood trembling with the fear she had had, the release of it and its re-action and now with the emotion of awe at her swift thought that in all her efforts to escape there was none.

He stared at her, saying no more than her name. It made no impression upon either of them that it was the first time he had used it without her surname. Then, perhaps because of the hill on which they were standing and the wetness of the handles of his machine as he held it, the wheel of his bicycle turned. He lost its balance. It fell over sideways on the stones. He did not try to save it. They scarcely noticed its clattering down but, as if their eyes were locked, gazed at each other until the unnatural fate it seemed to be was gradually superimposed by reality.

"What's brought you out here?" he said under his breath. She shook her head.

"No reason at all?"

"Just I wanted to be alone. I—I couldn't stop in the house the way I was."

"What way?"

She did not answer.

"What way?"

"After last Thursda' night."

"So you came out here! No reason! Just to be alone!—God Almighty!"

They were silent. He looked down at his bicycle lying on the road but made no movement to pick it up. Her head had turned with his. With his it turned back. Their eyes met again.

"What was it brought yeerself out here?" she whispered.

"I'm going away."

She caught her breath.

"I'm going to Doonvarna. There's an early train to Dublin in the morning. I just waited to hear confession to save Father Roche the trouble of coming in to Ardnashiela and then I came away."

"Why are ye goin' away?"

She had not wanted to see him until she was married,

yet the thought that he was going away was a desolation. He did not answer until she had asked him again.

"Why did you come out here?" he asked in reply.

She bowed her head, lifting it the next moment and crying out in her misery and despair—

"'Tis meself has driven ye away!"

He shook his head and declared it was not her.

"'Tis not yourself, but me," he said emphatically. "You didn't know. How could you know! Shure I ought to have known meself long before that morning we talked on the cliff. Perhaps I did know and I hid it from meself, because there was always a joy I had to be talking to you."

He looked at her and knew she was trembling but thought it was because of the cold of the mist as she stood there in those bitter wastes of the hills.

"You're cold," he said gently. "You should be walking back and there's three more miles before you'll be home. Come down the road now and I'll be walking with you till you're out of the gap."

She reminded him there was his bicycle.

"It can lie there," said he. "Shure there's no one will be coming this road now to-night."

"But ye'll be late yeerself in Doonvarna."

He said he could not leave her going alone. It pressed in his mind that with that mist she must be getting back to Ardnashiela, but he could not say good-bye to her then. He could not turn away and ride off into the hills. It was scarcely half a mile more out of the Gap. Even then she had the lonely road across the peat bogs. Just that half mile. It was little enough if, as in his heart it was seeming then, he should never come back to Ardnashiela again. How could he come back? He would never dare to meet her again after this. A secret? Yes, they could keep it a secret perhaps. But there was something more than mere secrecy

between them. Love was no secret. With a persistent vigilance of self-control, they might be able to hide it from others. They could not hide it from themselves. And how could the priest in him live through all that? He knew it was the last time they would ever see each other. He knew well he was never coming back. What was just that half mile then to be walking beside her? A few minutes to feel themselves near to each other! That was all. It seemed there must be some little pity God must extend to those of His creatures suffering as they were suffering by no will or seeking of their own.

"I'll walk back with you," he insisted, "just till we get out of the Gap. The mist'll be drifting more there over the marsh land. It's all pent up here between the hills. Why, it's wetting you through."

He touched the sleeve of her bodice.

"You're drowning wet," said he.

This tenderness of solicitude for her welfare was all as new and strange to her as love itself. That night in the kitchen when he had told her why he had come out to the threshing feast had bewildered and overwhelmed her. This affected her in the same way. She looked up, in every expression giving herself wholly over to him in the passivity of surrender.

He turned quickly away. They began walking down the hill together, silent, because they dared not speak, and with a clear space of the road between them.

As the ruined cottage loomed up out of the grey darkness the mist turned to gusts of rain. It slashed against his shoulders, but he only felt it whipping her.

"Why on earth did you come out to this place?" he muttered, as though the rain were all and when he glanced at her, he could see the shawl clinging to her hair.

It seemed suddenly then he beheld all the helplessness of

her—the wind and rain driving her down the road as Fate was driving her through life, as it had driven her out there to the Gap, that day of all days, that hour of all hours. With a sharp consciousness of power in himself created by that vision of her, he took her arm and turned her off the road. In those four walls of tumbling stone and beneath the rotting cover of the thatch, there was sufficient shelter to protect her till the lashing rain had passed.

She went with him in a dumb obedience. In the masterful manner in which he had taken her arm, it had not passed in her thoughts to protest, to warn him, to urge their going on. “’Til the worst of this is over,” he said, and she stepped through the black mouth of the door into the shelter of the walls.

It had been a cabin of two rooms. Both rafters and thatch had been swept away from that part in which the occupants had lived and cooked their meals. The gap of the chimney, like an old man’s mouth with toothless gums, was still black with the smoke of the fires that had burnt there. The stack itself had fallen long ago. The stones that had fallen inwards to the floor were green and weathered.

It was over the other room that the rafters and thatch still held. They swayed and muttered as the wind had its way with them, yet they clung tenaciously to the roof plate and would not leave go. Behind those walls of the kitchen they were partly sheltered from the wind but the rain drove in.

“You’d better go right in,” he told her and, without question, she turned through the narrow doorway into the semi-darkness beneath the broken thatch.

He followed, still forgetting all but the strength he felt at the sight of her helplessness. Only two nights before she had dropped fainting out of his arms. The vision of that was lingering with him. He saw her weaker than she was

and himself with a greater strength than the nature of a man can hope for. He believed in mastering her, he was mastering himself. He thought, seeing her as she stood trembling there, that he could forget himself in the presence of her needs.

"Take off that shawl for a bit," he said, "it's drenched with water. Here—give it to me."

She took it off. He did not look at her as she handed it to him, but in his fingers wrung out the drops of water from it and then shook it out.

With that characteristic garment about her head and hair, cutting down the line of her face, she was just the peasant girl of her class. Although he knew, he had not reckoned what she would look without it. Then, when he saw her with her hair about her forehead, the full oval of her face revealed, and felt he was as near to her as when, to the sound of the blind man's fiddle, she was in his arms, a clear sight of himself broke out with a light that blinded him.

There was no strength in him! More than that, there was no weakness that was real in her. Rather it was she who was strong with a power, not of her own exerting, but more insidious, more irresistible than that. As she stood there, returning his look and trembling with his eyes upon her, there was something in her against which he now recognised himself to be powerless. She might conceal it in silence, but it was not hidden from him there. She might drop her eyes to the look in his. It was not hidden there.

If ever he had thought of women who tempted men and from whose temptations he had not supposed he would be exempt, it was always in definite and active ways he had visioned them. Against such invitations to passion he had believed that always, in the strength of his ideals, he would be secure.

But this—this submissive surrender of soul and heart and

body—servant and slave to any purpose he might choose—he had left utterly out of his estimate of the forces of life. He knew then as their eyes met and hers fell, it was something against the pounding pressure of which ideals fell away like water. Perhaps he had learnt it for one instant that night in the farm kitchen. He had not known it until now. The world of all conscious right and wrong, of good and evil, slipped away from him. There had been a space in his mind where there was light falling. A shutter had been swiftly closed. He was in darkness—a darkness that radiated and breathed of her.

As if it actually were a darkness in which they were standing, he stretched out for her with his arms and his hands groping. She felt his fingers catching upon her shoulders. As the full clutch of his hands held her, it seemed as if she were floating upon a swiftly moving stream, that quickened and quickened in the race of its water, bearing her onwards to the edge of the torrent when the rush of his kisses beat like thunder in her ears.

PART III

I

JAMES KIRWAN had gone out of Ardnashiela that Saturday evening for a game of cards they were having at the cottage of Kelleher, the smith. It was a mile out of the village, going West away from Doonvarna, at Cantlin's Cross, and he was coming home when the night had fallen and all the mist that had blown up from the sea was gone in rain and sheets of moisture over the land.

There were stars, flung in myriad points of steel across the sky, and beyond, where the sea lay, a late harvest moon, dilated with faint light of flame, was cutting through the band of purple mist on the horizon.

He was in a good humour because he had won a few shillings at *spoil-five*, yet such was his mood, that his humour was no joy to him. It was Kelleher who had lost and, what with the drink he had taken and his temper at losing the shillings that were gone from him, he had broken up the game and said he would play no more. They might have played another hour and longer so that although Kirwan was jingling the money he had in his pocket, he was annoyed to think it was less than there might have been, for his luck was in with him and he had known he could not lose that night.

In a way to satisfy and prove to himself how much the fortune of the cards was with him, he took the pack he had brought from his pocket. The cards that Kelleher had had to be playing with were dirty and worn and marked. There was no telling a king from a queen or a jack of spades because of the dirt that was on them. It was his own he had

brought there for them to be using that night and if there was the scratch of a mark he knew on the back of the knave of diamonds, he used it to no advantage unless he saw it there in the hands of one of those he was playing against. And when it was in his own hand it was, shure, what did it matter how marked it might be so long as the others had no knowledge of it to be using against him?

There was little visibility that night as he went along the road, but he could just see the faces of the cards when he took them out in his hands. He began shuffling them then as he walked and every moment cutting a card to see what it was. First it was the ace of hearts and then the king of diamonds that he cut and almost every time it was a card of some high value, so that he knew the luck was well in with him. If they had gone on playing for another hour, it might surely have been a small piece of gold he would have brought home with him in his pocket, instead of those three shillings rubbing against the copper pieces that he had.

About a quarter of a mile outside Ardnashiela there was a pile of stones on the grass waiting for any man that might be found to be breaking them up for the mending of the road. They had been there two years and more and the couch grass, the docks and ragwort were growing thick about them.

Kirwan was still shuffling and cutting the cards in his hands when he came to the place. It was not at the heap of stones he was looking at all when the voice of a man jerked out of the silence and stopped him where he was.

"How's the luck in with ye?" the man said, as though he knew what it was the farmer had in his mind when he was shuffling and cutting the cards.

With fear always ready to him in darkness and lonely places, Kirwan stared at him with quick suspicion. As far as he could see in that light, the man had clothes that were

not in rags on him and if it was a tinker he was, it was a strange thing for him to be dressed like that.

"Who is it is askin' me that?" demanded Kirwan with a sharpness in his voice to hide the fear he had.

"Shure what's it matter who another 'ud be, if yeer luck's well in with yeerself?"

There was some meaning in that if there was not an answer to his question. It was true enough the farmer little cared who a man was if he could be winning pieces of money out of him at cards. That answer seemed to satisfy him. His suspicions were gone as swiftly as they had come. A slow curiosity took their place. He drew a step nearer.

"If 'tis me luck is in or out," said he with a grin on his lips, "there's little matter that could be to yeerself is walkin' the roads the way the stones themselves 'ud be a rest to ye."

The man did not move. There appeared to be no offence in him at Kirwan's imputation that he had no money to be playing with, but was begging his way from one door to another.

"I'd play a game of *forty-five* with anny man," said he.

Kirwan drew nearer another step and looked the more closely at his face. He was no tinker. Then what was he doing there like a man would be worn out with the hardness of the roads? But the curiosity of the farmer had stayed little longer than his fear. He thought of his luck and the cards he had been cutting as he came along the road. He thought of the time he had lost for his playing with the hour that Kelleher had broken up the game and told them all they could go to Hell with the cards they were holding against him.

"I'd play ye a game of *forty-five*," he said, "if ye'd come along to the kitchen in me house is beyond Ardnashiela.

"'Tis not that way I'm going," said the man, "and 'tis here as well as any place we could be playin' now with the

flat of the stones to be laying our cards on and no heat of any fire in a room or the lift of the drink might be gettin' into our heads."

There was a persuasiveness in his voice. It was without realising till afterwards what was happening to him that Kirwan fell under the spell of it. His luck was tempting him too and there were few men in Ardnashiela that could hold out against him in a game of *forty-five*.

"Have ye got any money with ye?" he asked cautiously as he sat down on the stones.

"I have indeed," said the man.

"Will ye show it me then, for 'tis not meself would be playin' with anny strange man I'd be meetin' on the roads but what I'd know had he money to be payin' with and he losin' with the faces of the cards."

The man laughed at him and said it was easy seen the farmer knew that pennies were not to be picked off thorn bushes. Then he thrust his hand into his pocket and when Kirwan saw the two half crowns, the threepenny piece in silver and the copper money he brought out in the palm of his hand, he was satisfied and began shuffling the cards.

The look of money always excited him and he was thinking already how much of that he had seen would presently be lying in the warmth of his pocket with the shillings he had won at Kelleher's.

There was soon a silence from them as they played and all the time Kirwan was thinking how he could be telling them at Creasy's house in the street the way he had played cards with a strange man on the road, taking the risk of winning or losing and going back to his house with two half-crowns and a threepenny piece of silver in his pocket. Perhaps it was thinking of it so much took his mind off what he was doing. He had good cards dealt out to him, but the other

man had better and again and again he won the trick that Kirwan thought surely would be his own.

After the first game he had lost eightpence. Nevertheless he knew his luck was still with him because there were good cards coming to him and with the skill he had at the playing and his cunning with the cards he put down, he knew he must win in the end. All the same he lost the second game and then the third and there was only fourpence left to him out of the money he had won from Kelleher in his house.

"God blast the cards!" he exclaimed at last, "for 'tis not the badness of the luck I'd be havin' meself but the divvle's own luck is comin' to ye."

The man laughed softly with a long murmur in his throat and he said nothing, but dealt the cards for the fourth game on to the flat face of the big stone they were playing on. Still the best of the luck was with him and he was successful again. This time it was more than the three shillings he had won that were gone from Kirwan and it was with a poor grace he threw the cards down. It was bad enough to him to be losing what he had won, but when it came to money that was his own he had taken with him out of the house, his temper was worse than Kelleher's temper had been.

But it was more than mere anger now at the fortune he was having. Insidious thoughts, mingling with fear, were beginning to sense their way into his mind. He began to wonder what a queer thing it was and unlike himself to be playing cards with a strange man at night on a heap of stones by the roadside. He tried to remember the thought that had first induced him to it. As he shuffled the cards, he seemed to recollect it was the persuasiveness of the man's voice that had invited him and made it appear reasonable enough to him then when he first sat down.

From under the pale red tufts of his eyebrows, he snatched a glance at the man playing with him there in that odd com-

panionship. It was quite an ordinary man he seemed to be, but whether he was a tinker with clothes that had been given him at the door of a good house, or whether he was a travelling schoolmaster going from one place to another with his books hidden in the pocket of his coat, or what he was, Kirwan found it impossible in his mind to say.

He was dealing out the cards then and not looking as closely as he might have been at what he was doing for he dropped a card on the grass. As he stooped to pick it up at the side of the man's foot where it lay, his heart was bound in the swift ice of fear. Out of the end of the leg of his trousers, it was not a foot that was protruding but what looked like a horned lump of flesh and to Kirwan's eyes as the fear shot into them and linked with the horror in his mind, seemed cloven as a hoof.

He looked no more.

With a scream, as of one who screams in terror in his sleep, he scrambled to his feet and ran. Down the road towards Ardnashiela he pelted. His hat flew off. He did not know it had gone. And behind him in the darkness he heard the hobbling feet of the man, like a spancelled cow, running behind him.

He was crying out that the farmer had not paid him for the last game he had lost. In the black night, between the clatter of his own feet on the road, Kirwan heard his voice and it seemed to be words of a curse he was crying out so that he ran the faster down the road. It was not until the houses in the street were at both sides of him that he stopped to listen.

All the night was still.

The wind that had blown the mist up from the sea had not left a murmur behind it.

II

IT was close upon ten o'clock when Kirwan came home that night. He did not walk by the road and across the fields as he would have done at any other time, but to the end of the village and along the strand where the noise of the sea was a quiet for the sound of his fears. Notwithstanding, he looked over his shoulder every few steps he took. Once he trod upon a piece of sea-weed that spat and crackled under his feet. At the unexpected sound his heart came to a sudden leaping. The sweat was cold as drops of dew on his forehead.

It was the real panic of fear that was on him. Fears of the unknown disembowelled him of all instincts of a man. It was a beast at bay he became as they crept about him. Any escape he would have seized, flying from one darkness to another. It was only by muttering and singing in his voice as he hurried home that he kept the hold of his reason and came a sane man to his door.

“We are the boys of Wexford
Who fought with heart and hand—”

He sang in a cracked voice which when presently he heard it break on a high note terrified him with the sound of its fear into a moment of silence. But he could not bear the silence and then he talked aloud.

“May the Lord God Almighty have mercy on me,” he muttered, invoking blessings from the only source he knew could defend him from evil. “May the Holy Mother and all

the Saints of God have a care of me this night till the first tint of dawn."

It was not too long he would ask for that care and blessing. Surely it might be granted him just that little while till dawn broke. It was not a greedy man he was, with all the terror that was on him. If it was the angels of God were round him just that night, he felt it was any damned thing he could face at all with the light of morning. He forced himself to see that the grace of God had been with him already.

"Shure if it weren't for that card droppin'," he whispered, "mightn't I have been playin' with himself now at this hour and he puttin' the stroke on me with every little look he'd be twistin' out of his eyes."

That was a terrible thought. The sweat broke out on his forehead again. But it brought its consolations. The grace of God must have been with him, no matter what had happened him that night, for there he was walking with the firm sand under his feet, the sound of the water breaking in his ears and the start of orange light from the kitchen window of the farm not far distant now in his eyes.

With a thankfulness to the Almighty that had no greater depth to it than the safety of his skin and his reason, he came at last to his door and tumbled into the reassuring light of the peat fire and the oil lamp that was burning on the table. With a slam he shut the door behind him and ran the bolt far home into its socket.

The blind man was sitting there alone in the recess of the chimney. He was turning the bellows wheel. As Kirwan entered, he stopped and his head bent to listening that served him for sight, but he said nothing.

The farmer took no notice of him. With a trembling that was still in him, he went straight to the cupboard of the deal dresser and took out a bottle of whisky, half filling a tumbler

and drinking it neat like water. As the warmth of it ran in his throat and down into the hollow void of his stomach he drew a deep breath of relief. The voice of Mrs. Kirwan reassured him then from the room beyond, where they slept.

"Is that yeerself?" she called.

"It is—thanks be to God!" said he.

"Is Mary with ye?"

"Shure, why the hell should she?"

"Where is it ye been then?"

"'Tis a game of cards I've been playin' with Kelleher beyond over—and the Lord God knows what 'ud be happenin' to me the time I came away from that place."

He waited an instant for her to be asking him what it was had happened to him on his way home and the next moment he saw her there in the doorway herself with her black hair in tangled shreds lying greasily over the doubtful whiteness of her cotton shift.

He was ready with that residue of fear that was still lingering in him to be over-surprised at anything that happened that night. Standing with his legs apart, gripping his empty glass, he stared at her in astonishment.

"What's on ye in the name of God!" he exclaimed, "to be gettin' out of yeer bed and comin' standin' there at the door?"

"Where's Mary?" she asked.

"How the hell would I know?" said he.

"She's gone."

"Where has she gone?"

"Wisha, I dunno."

"When was she gone?"

"I dunno."

"When did ye see her last?"

"The time she'd be comin' in from the milkin'."

"And 'tis not since ye've seen her?"

"It is not."

There was no sound of anxiety in her voice. On the usual dull monotonous note she gave her answers to all his questions. Impatiently he turned on the blind man.

"Has she said ere a word to yeerself at all, blind man?" he asked.

"She has not."

James Kirwan looked about the room and as he looked he saw in his mind the remembrance of the dancing and the sight in the eyes of Fennel, the fisherman, that had followed her round and round as she laughed and danced. He laughed himself then and it was with a lewd grin on his face he turned to his wife standing there in her shift.

"'Tis up with the fisherman in his cottage she's gone," said he, "and isn't it keepin' her he is till he's had his way with her?"

It was with the first note of feeling in her voice that she asked him if he would not go up there to the cliff road and bring her back with him.

"I will not!" he shouted against the call he felt to be doing what she said. "God knows there's enough I seen in the darkness this night and there's not all the sin is in the pits of hell 'ud be drawin' me out there to be stoppin' it. Shure didn't I know always there was a bad streak of blood was in her, and if 'tis that way she be goin' without the words of the priest, let her go. 'Tis not meself'll be fetchin' her away this night. Get into yeer bed, woman, for God's sake get into yeer bed!"

In silence she did as he told her. He came presently himself to lie beside her. With his hot breath on her shoulders, he told her in heavy whispers the thing he had seen on the road that night.

III

FENNEL had brushed the dust off his boots and was reaching down the best coat he had to go to Mass in that Sunday morning when the door of his cottage opened without knock or warning and James Kirwan stood on the threshold. He looked about him and long at the bed in the room before he spoke.

"Where's Mary?" he said at last.

Fennel gaped at him.

"Where's Mary?" he repeated.

The fisherman walked across the room and stared in his face.

"Where should she be?" he asked. "And why in the name of God are ye lookin' for her here?"

"Mightn't she be here," said Kirwan, "and she not in the house itself down beyond?"

"What would she be here for this hour of the morning?"

If in his soul a man can grin, when it is not revealed either in his countenance or in a consciousness of his mind, yet is surely there somewhere in the utterance of his nature, James Kirwan grinned then.

"Oh—shure she may have gone this time and early, the way I'd miss her meself comin' up."

Every feature in the fisherman's face bent into the bewilderment of a frown.

"What is it ye're talkin'?" he muttered.

"I'm talkin'," said Kirwan, "what I'm after wantin' to know. What time is it she left ye for she was not milkin' the cows in the shed when I left the place."

Fennel murmured she had not been there and suddenly with that statement as he made it, he partly recognised what the farmer was imputing against him.

"D'ye mean was she here last night?"

There was a suspicious quiet in his manner of saying it, too delicate almost to stir the caution always ready in the composition of James Kirwan. Rubbing his hands together and with the sly lasciviousness of a smile, he said it was that he meant surely and added some gross recognition of it as of something that might happen to any man and girl on the eve of their marrying. There were many reasons why the farmer had no cause to be sorry for what he believed had happened. If it were so, there was no turning round from his promise left to the fisherman now. He would not dare to be asking for a dowry or anything at all.

Joe Fennel stood there a moment in silence looking at Kirwan, not only with contempt as he had before, but with a quivering of anger that strained his lips and dilated his nostrils as he breathed.

"Is it that sort of man ye think I am?" said he, "to be bringin' sin and shame to a girrl before the priest has said the word over her?" He did not know what to do with his hands to keep them away from Kirwan's face. It was a wide and a flabby face and he hated the look in it. In but the shortest space of time he knew he could disfigure it, almost beyond recognition. For Mary's sake and for no other reason at all, he kept his hands to himself.

"Ye're a dirrty man, James Kirwan!" he said, when with peculiar grimaces and quick snorts of his breath, he had mastered himself. "I dunno how was it ye came to gettin' a child with the sweetness and gentleness of that girrl at all. Isn't it mean as a dish of dirrty water ye are? Shure, it makes me sick to be tastin' the looks of ye and let ye be rememberin' that the time—" He stopped. As though a

voice had called him to silence, his words ceased. With a changed look in his eyes as the light of the whole matter penetrated the density of his intellect, he gazed in a sharpening fear at Kirwan.

"Where is she?" he shouted.

Relieved to observe that transition in the course of the fisherman's thoughts, Kirwan was only too glad to let pass all he had said.

"Shure, I'm askin' ye that meself," he cried back at him. A show of spirit here pledged him to no vindication of anything the fisherman had said. He saw quickly enough that Fennel was frightened now. His fighting mood was gone. This lifting of the farmer's voice was a suitable contrivance to preserve his dignity.

"Amn't I after tellin' ye she was not in the house last night," he went on, "and she's not there this morning? Shure, there's not a crease on her bed and divvle a sight or sound of her anny place at all."

They gaped from one to the other in a witlessness of mind.

"Where was it last she was seen?" muttered Fennel.

"Herself saw her comin' in from the milkin'."

"What time was that?"

"'Twas five or a half after it may be."

"Did she say annything—where she was goin' or anny word at all?"

"Divvle a word."

"Where were ye yeerself that time?"

"'Twas in the barn I was, trussin' and stackin' the straw."

"Ye had no sight of her yeerself?"

"I had not."

For a moment, that seemed to exhaust all the questions the wit of Fennel could conceive. He stood in silence looking at Kirwan, bemused with the effort of his catechism and confounded with the answers he had received. In a mute

helplessness he turned away to the window, staring out across the wide space of the bay to the distance of Helvic Head and that far cluster of trees in their isolation at Killanardrish.

The best of the weather had gone since the threshing was over. That mist the evening before was merely a herald of rain and wind gathering up out of the South-West. The clear interval that had followed it had been swept over with clouds before midnight. The sea was now a slaty grey with gusts of wind whipping it till it seemed to be snarling with a treacherous anger.

"When did ye first find 'twas the way she's gone?" muttered Fennel without turning.

"At ten bi the clock when I came home."

"Where were ye that time of the night?"

"Havin' a game of the cards I was at Kelleher's, the smith."

"And was there no trace ye saw of her on the road comin' back?"

Whether enlightening or not, he asked any questions that were new in his mind. For it was being borne upon him now that all that was left for them was to search and search until they found her. At the sound of the farmer's silence to that last enquiry, he turned round.

"Was there no trace ye saw?" he asked.

Kirwan's eyes were set wide and his mouth was gaping. He had fully realised at last that Mary had not been that night with the fisherman and with the sound of this last question a light, freshened with the memory of his fears of the night before, had lit up the whole latitude of his imagination.

With stammerings of awe and the sickness of fright in his voice, he told Fennel of the man he had seen, the game of cards he had played sitting on the stones, the money he had lost and the way it had ended for him.

"'Twas the hoof of a foot he had," he whispered, "an'

it peepin' out with a cleft in it like a cow or a wild beast maybe. Wasn't it that time we were playin' he was puttin' the stroke on me to be leadin' me astray? He was indeed. And wasn't it great sense I had to be runnin' down the road puttin' crosses on meself without waitin' for the cards he had in his hand or the hat would be fallin' off of me head?"

The mind of the fisherman now was wandering like a child lost in a trackless wood, all power of reason and selection gone from it, turning this way and then that in fruitless efforts to find a path out into the clear light. One vivid idea only was constant in his thoughts. The power of that unknown world was still about him. Still, directly or indirectly, he knew himself to be the sport of its will. From the tale he had heard, in which there could be no suspicion of incredulity and of which there was only one explanation, he knew They were abroad with Their malice and Their mischief to be doing harm and bringing sorrow into his life.

Mary was gone. Just in that moment before she would be coming to bring him the softness and kindness of life and drive out of his days the long loneliness that was there, the faeries had taken her.

Why had They taken her? Oh, shure, there were a thousand reasons why They should. Wasn't it the gentlest voice she had and that look away from the world there was always in her face? The wonder of all women was in her eyes and it was ones like that they would be taking more than others who had not such great quality in themselves.

He sat down on the chair by the side of his fire, looking no more at Kirwan, but rocking his weight to and fro from one foot to the other.

A mood of fatalism and helplessness had come over him.

"Wisha, God be with the days," he muttered and despair

was so overwhelming upon him then, that though a few moments before he had been casting about in the lively fear of his mind where they might search, now all volition and energy of thought was gone from him.

He gave himself up as if he were its victim to the belief that he would never see her again. Truly, sometimes they came back who were taken that way. They came back, but their wits were gone from them. Once he had seen a woman, babbling with loose and drooping lip who, after being lost for seven months, had returned to the door of the place where she had been living. And of what use was she to the man of the house who had let her in? There was nothing she remembered of the room where she had eaten her food, or the bed she had slept in. With a stream of spittle running always from her lips she had no power to be keeping in her mouth, she had lived with him there in his cabin in the hills for three years and more, and in the end they had found her with her head in a bucket of water, with her hair floating and her body twisting to keep herself there till death came to her. And didn't it come soon after in the black of one night?

He prayed God that Mary might never come back at all if it was that way she would be coming.

Then he stood up by the fire and beat his hands and shut his fist and hammered it against the breast of the chimney. "Ah—shure, God help us!" he cried out in the pain of his loneliness and despair. "Isn't it long the days have been for me and wasn't I thinkin' they were goin' to be slippin' by like water over the smooth of the stones?"

IV

FATHER ROCHE served Mass at ten o'clock that morning and was gone out of Ardnashiela on the old white horse he rode about his straggling parish before the disappearance of Mary Kirwan was put about the village.

Even by then it would have been hard to know who was the first to spread the story. Mrs. Kirwan went to Mass and spoke no word to any one. All that morning the blind man sat by the fire in the farm kitchen, smoking his pipe and turning the wheel when the peat needed it. As in the manner of a dumb animal, having lost all central purpose in his being, less than a vagrant and by physical contact alone keeping in touch with the meaningless movement of life, Fennel wandered out onto the cliffs. If he were aware of any motive in himself, it was that he was looking for Mary. He was not searching for her. There was no hope, only a fear in him that he would find her. But fear in him was not the over-mastering emotion as it was in Kirwan. With all the terror that he had of finding her witless, demented, a sight of horror where beauty had once been, there was nothing in his nature to drive him to shirk the truth if this was what it had to be.

With the heavy steps of one wandering in sleep, he walked round the headlands as far as where he had landed her that morning upon the rocks. At every opening rent in the cliffs where the sea had cut a way, he stopped. Down every crevasse he looked. With the first glance, his eyes narrowed as though to hide rather than discover the thing he might find. When there was nothing there, they opened wider.

Then he dared to look and from there went onwards from one headland to another.

All that day he wandered, climbing sometimes down the cliff side to the water's edge and looking helplessly over the grey leaden fret and fume of the sea. For the first time in all his life as a fisherman, the water revealed a sullen relentlessness to him. It did not move him to fear. It broke his spirit to surrender. At the feet of the rocks, black with their slime of weed, the waves an unbroken hiss and clamour in his ears and the spray licking his face, he stood in a humility of submission. Life had its way with men and women. He recognised that then. The sea was life to him. He knew no abstract sense of it. If somewhere in the mass of those grey waters her body was lying in the drag of the waves as he had seen the bodies of big fish lie that had died in their own element, floating half submerged till the birds consumed them, that then was the way life had with her and with him—a way as fixed and inevitable as the tides themselves.

Through all that day, it never occurred to him to adopt the usual measures that are resorted to in a civilized community in such a case of sudden disappearance. There was a sergeant and one policeman in a cottage, called the barracks, in the street of Ardnashiela. It never entered his head to communicate with them. This was not so much because of what they could or could not do, but rather because one thing only was certain in his mind. The faeries had taken her. How else in so sudden a way could she have disappeared? Had he never heard that story from Kirwan of his encounter with one of Them the night before, this was the inevitable conclusion he would have come to.

The only normal things that happen in the life of such a place as Ardnashiela are of such small account as almost to pass unnoticed. Births, the natural deaths of old people,

quarrellings and occasional emigrations, these make up the only spectacular conditions of existence.

It is the press of life that robs life of its significance—the crowd of people in which the souls of people are lost.

Whatever one may think in reason of that significance they put upon these happenings on the wild coasts of Ireland, it is not inconsequent. It is not one of neglect. The ways of life are real to them. They move with an unerring and compelling destiny. If the vast purposes of it are not divulged, they are at least revealed.

It was not by the agency of police or recognised authority that Fennel thought he would ever be able to find Mary Kirwan. The faeries had taken her. It was They alone who could give her back.

In such a manner the mind of James Kirwan was at work though driving him to different measures. The thought of communicating with the police never entered his head when he left Fennel's cottage. There was the truth of it. They were abroad. If it was at the cards he had lost, surely the luck was with him that night when he had pelted down the road and escaped.

All that night he had lain upon his bed, listening for the ever-expected knock upon the door. They had left him in peace. It was Mary They had taken. What other reason was there for her disappearance than this?

The countless things that might happen to people in crowded places could not happen here. Where had she gone, how had she been spirited away into nothingness if it was not Their work?

He had said the night before to his wife he had always known there was a bad drop of blood in her. It was more than that he had known. He had known, but he had never made it conscious to himself in words, that there was

something was queer in her. Daughter though she might be of his, and useful with her hands and steady about the farm, she was no ordinary girl. Why had she gone on as she did when he killed the black dog? What was there in her to be fondling a little beast like that? And why had it ever come to the house at all?

He knew. He had known all along. But never had he known as surely as now.

One person his thoughts turned to if help could be given or were of any account in such an event as this. With no such uncertain steps as Fennel's, wandering over the headlands, he walked down the cliff road and turned into the street, knocking at Shaughnessy's door and waiting for the thin voice responding within before he entered.

It was a cottage of one room with a wash-house beneath a sloping roof at the back. In the distressed light from the one little window, the sheep, Shaughnessy had killed in that room late in the week, hung from the beam below the thatch. A basin of blood, darkened in its contact with the air, stood on the floor beneath it. The last drop had fallen. A thick solid skein of red swung from the end of the beast's nostrils. There was no longer any flow of blood to carry it away. The animal hung there with its skin half ripped from it, falling in woolly folds from its pale flanks as garments that are dropping from a naked body. A stench of blood, viscous and heavy, lay upon the air. The smell of the peat could not cleanse or overcome it.

To Kirwan the sight of that carcase and the reek of blood were nothing. His eyes passed by the pale thing, suspending with its attenuated flesh from the beam. It was at Shaughnessy he looked, lying in the disorder of his bed with the dirty clothes heaped up about him. His long, grey hair was gathered in greasy masses on his neck. His watery eyes,

blood-shot and dropping in the lids, stared where they looked without human meaning. Notwithstanding the unnatural largeness of his head, with the absence of any lines above the small features he had, even to the curve of his lips, he was more like a woman than a man—a woman grown old, who has dragged her looks with her through every condition of life to the edge of the grave.

To this man and in that place, the farmer told his story of what had happened him the night before and the way Themselves had taken his daughter out of the house so that she was no more to be seen in any place at all.

Shaughnessy sat for a long while silent in his bed, blinking his eyes. The water rolled out of them, one thin drop after another down his cheeks.

“’Tis often the way with a young girrl has ’ticin’ looks with her,” he said presently, “and she be the side of her marriage bed. Shure what would They be wantin’ with her but her body itself can have no childer of their own.”

Kirwan accepted this with a nodding head. His relations with the butcher in their transactions over sheep were very different from what they were here. In business matters, being the only farmer nearer than five miles, he could afford to bully and coerce. Now he came as a novice to one knowing mysteries and being acquainted with the meaning of dreams.

Wherever these occult beliefs exist in any community, the seer, the soothsayer, the prophet is to be found. It was known by nearly all in Ardnashiela that Shaughnessy could read a dream and had told queer things at times from them that had come true. There were many stories whispered about him having foundation perhaps in his trade. No one conceived it dirty, or unhealthy for him to be killing his sheep in the room where he slept and draining the blood out of it into a basin on the floor. Yet there was scarcely one

who, when his door happened to be open, had seen the drab beast hanging there, who did not feel an inward revulsion at the thought of such a companion through the length and darkness of night. He dealt with death. It was his trade. Every woman in Ardnashiela, seeing him from her windows as he drove his victim through the street from Kirwan's fields shuddered in herself at the placidity of that smile that seemed always to be lingering at such times about the curve of his lips. It was not because killing an animal was an ugly business to them, but because it was to be killed by Shaughnessy and with a laugh maybe in that little room of his with the door shut fast and the firelight trembling on the window pane.

Thus the stories about him had grown around his personality and the work he did. Kirwan was not the only one who in secret had come to him to explain and advise and read the meaning of hidden things.

Having accepted this first pronouncement as reason enough for the disappearance of Mary, the farmer asked was there anything in the name of God that he could do.

"Wasn't it a useful hand she was to me," he said, "with the work she'd be doin' on the farm—and hadn't I the promise of Fennel himself, 'twas comin' to help me she'd be after she was married, the way I could have saved meself payin' for labour? Shure God knows 'twould have been hard enough as it was and isn't she gone entirely from me now?"

With grunts and shaking breaths, for he was an old man and the years had given him a weight of flesh he carried with some difficulty, Shaughnessy lurched out of bed. Crossing the floor in his naked feet, he bent down and with his fingers he pulled away the thick skein of blood from the sheep's nostrils.

"Let ye take that," said he, "and boil it down in a sup of new milk would be warm out of the cow. And when ye're goin' to yeer bed, let ye open the door of the house and put the bowl of it down on the sill. And if 'tis gone it is in the mornin' maybe 'tis that will pacify Them and perhaps then ye'll be findin' her, though God knows I wouldn't say the way she'd be at all. I would not."

V

FATHER ROCHE had scarcely gone on home when the news was broadcast over Ardnashiela. Women gathered at their doorways. There were groups standing at the sea wall. Men leaned about on the barrels in Creasy's house, drinking, but with no sound of laughter as they talked.

In the opinion of Mrs. Troy, who, perhaps because of her association with the priests who always lodged in her cottage, had little belief in faeries, it was as great a pity as any that Father Costello had gone away to Dublin.

"'Tis not himself," said she, "would have stood idle at corners talkin' the trashy things they're all sayin' down the street. 'Tis out and lookin' for herself he'd have been. Isn't it shame that man Kirwan ought to have for hisself the way he'd be standin' at Creasy's talkin' mad tales of a man he saw on the road that night? Shure, if 'tis gone she is and no sight of her, mustn't she be somewhere or surely they'd be findin' her some place or another!"

The conclusiveness of that argument convinced her. Father Roche, whose shrewd comments upon character somehow always became public property and clung to people like adhesive labels, had once said she was the only civilised creature in Ardnashiela. She remembered that and lived up to her reputation. Others remembered it and nodded their heads at everything she said as though it came from the fount of wisdom. They nodded their heads as they listened to her then. But it was not the common sense of Mrs. Troy or the calculated opinions of the profoundest learning could

alter one point in the fixed and narrow compass of their beliefs.

They nodded their heads, but they knew well what had become of Mary Kirwan. It was doubtful in the mind of any of them whether she would ever be seen in that place again. And if it was her escape she made, or was sent back from where she was gone, it was no gladness, but a fear they would have to be talking to her or looking at her at all.

"Shure, what good is it her sayin' the Father would have been lookin' for her!" one of them exclaimed as they walked away from the common sense of that sort of talk. "Yirra, how could himself be findin' her more than another! Doesn't the world know 'tis in the thin of the air They'd be most times, an' if 'twas seein' her himself it was, and he makin' a grab at her, wouldn't They have her the way she'd be slip-pin' out of his fingers with all the curses he'd be puttin' on 'em! She would indeed!"

Sergeant McGrath felt it his duty to take the matter into his own hands. He found Kirwan coming away from Shaughnessy's door and drew him aside into a corner of the street. A small crowd at a distance stood watching them as they talked.

"When was it ye missed her first?" asked McGrath.

"Last night."

The Sergeant wrote it down in a thumbled and dirty notebook containing at one end statements made to him about strayed dogs, drunkenness and obscene language in the open street, while at the other were records of small amounts lost and won at games of *forty-five*.

"Why didn't ye come and tell meself about it then?" he continued.

"Shure, 'twas not at that hour of the dark night I'd be trustin' meself to go out at all."

"Why not?"

"Faith, I'd just come in."

The Sergeant lifted his shoulders and settled himself down to a closer cross-examination. By the time he had extracted the story of the man with the cloven foot and the game of cards on the stones by the roadside, his mouth was wide open and he was wrestling within himself between the inherent superstition in him on one side and the official capacity of his intelligence on the other.

"If it comes into the court," said he, and said it with dignity, the court being the ultimate destination to him of any matter of importance, "they'll not listen to that story at all. The magistrate'll wave his hand—like that—" he gave ocular demonstration. "That's what he'll do."

"Shure, he can wave his hand," said Kirwan, "and he can do anny thing he damned well likes, but 'twas meself playin' the cards, the time I saw the hoof he had, peepin' out of the leg of his trousers. An' shure, if there are things like that in the world, is it strange at all the faeries would be takin' her?"

The Sergeant was loath to admit it was not strange.

"But I won't put it down in me book," said he, "for they wouldn't listen to it."

Feeling that some questionable opprobrium was cast upon his story by being thus omitted from the book, Kirwan began to lose his temper.

"Well, if 'tis not the faeries have taken her," he said, "will ye tell me where is it she's gone? She was milkin' the cows last evenin' an' 'tis nowhere in anny place she is now. Where is she?"

McGrath confessed himself with reluctance as unable to answer that question. Every suggestion that came into his mind was over-ruled by the prevailing belief from which he found no escape. He could not have denied that he had known of people in those parts who, in this sudden manner

had disappeared, returning in a week, a month, a year, and sometimes more maybe, with their wits lost, babbling like children and unable to give any coherent account of where they had gone, or what they had seen. He knew of one who had never come back and of whom all trace for ever had been lost.

Still there was his duty to perform and the certain dignity attached to it he could not afford to lose. Wetting his pencil at his lips, he made minute enquiries as to how she was dressed when last seen, whether anything had happened to be frightening her and was she given to going off like that for long walks maybe, the way she might just have been lost.

"How would she be lost!" shouted Kirwan in the exasperation coming easily to one of his nature when submitted to a fire of questions. "Isn't the place open, with the roads about, the way ye can see all ways for miles and miles! And what the hell is there should be a fright to her? Isn't she goin' to be married in a few weeks and isn't that enough for a girrl to be holdin' to where she is?"

All these things the Sergeant admitted and went away with such information as he could get and none of which he believed was of any use to him in such a case.

Going back to the barracks, he called out Tim Cotter, the constable, to be bringing out the bicycles.

"If we don't get off up the hills," he said, "we shall be catchin' himself as he comes away out of Mass at Grange!"

They over-took Father Roche on his way back to Killanardrish. With the stiff brushing of his eyebrows, he looked down at them from the back of his white horse. Having heard the plain statement of the case, he sat there pondering over it with the reins loose over the back of his horse's neck. At last with a slow turn of his eye upon them and leaning

forward a little as though he would have lowered his voice, he said,

"What does Kirwan himself say about it? What does the fisherman say? What do they all say?"

The Sergeant cleared his throat. He looked at his notebook, but read nothing in it, then he raised his head.

"They're sayin' 'tis taken bi the faeries she is."

Father Roche set his gaze into the Sergeant's eyes, which tried to meet his look, shifted, lost their balance of control and fell. When he raised them again it was no higher than the boots of the Parish Priest, sunk deep in his stirrups. There was no smile on Father Roche's face, but somewhere in the glint of his eye, there was a glimmering light of satisfaction. He picked up the reins again and fitted them between his fingers.

"Ride on into Doonvarna," said he, "go to the police there. Tell them. Ask them to make enquiries at the station. Give them all the particulars ye've got. 'Twill break their hearts when ye read out all ye've got in that book. Get over there and come back to me this evening."

He jogged his heels into the flanks of the white mare and he rode away.

VI

WHEN Sergeant McGrath returned that evening to Killanardrish, he brought no news with him. Nothing had been seen or heard of Mary Kirwan in Doonvarna. The only train leaving the little town on Sunday was that going by a circuitous route and taking many hours to reach Dublin. Amongst the few passengers that had got into the train, there was none answering to her description. Father Costello had gone by it. Taking a room at the Ship Hotel, he had slept the night there and departed the next morning. All the other passengers were known to the station master. There was no trace of Mary Kirwan.

The Sergeant had questioned people on the road as he went and returned. There was not one had seen her. In obedience to instructions from Father Roche and accompanied, like a shadow on the road behind him, by Tim Cotter, the constable, he went North the next day to Ballybrishlawn.

The result there was the same. No one had seen, no one had heard of her. At every cottage on the road they had enquired. The same answer was given them.

"There's no girrl has been here along the roads. Wouldn't we have seen her if she had?"

It would indeed have been a wonder if they had not. In that part of the West of Ireland, the habitations of human beings are few and far apart, having all the mysteriousness of fortuity, like mushrooms chancing their solitary life in the wide acres of the green meadows. Here a farm and there a peat-lifter's cottage with great wastes of

barren and uncultivated land in between, rocks thrusting their grey heads from beneath the soil, heather and ling growing and little belts of wind-swept thorn trees. The light of a glow-worm on the grass at night can well seem to a lonely traveller the welcome beacon in a cottage window, can well draw him on over the stony land and the desolate peat bogs to find a shelter for the night, can well, when it disappears and he finds the bleak land all about him with no sign of living man or the roof that covers him, strike the string of imagination upon that delicate instrument of his mind and set its vibrations throbbing with the wild tunes of fear.

The Sergeant returned from Ballybrishlawn with no news of Mary. There as well he acquainted them at the constabulary barracks with the particulars of her disappearance. Inevitably into his account of it, as in Doonvarna too, there had filtered fragments of Kirwan's story, of the man playing cards with him on the road that night. The spirit of their beliefs tintured it all. They may have searched and enquired, questioned this one and that, but underlying all their endeavours, spread the sense of their fatalism.

What was the good of looking for one who had gone that way? Wouldn't it be all the same in a hundred years whether they found her or not? And where was it a girl would be going at the time of her marrying to be disappearing the like of that? It wasn't like a woman at all to be going on that way and if it wasn't like a woman, then what was it like? They smoked their pipes and shook their heads over it across the barrack fire at Ballybrishlawn and if they did not say what they thought, it was only because the printed regulations of the Crown were always there upon the walls to remind them what they were.

North and South and East across the country, Fennel, the fisherman, wandered, looking for her too. As far as the

entrance of the Gap and enquiring amongst those few scattered farms at the foot of the hills of Doon, he made his search that had no impulse in it to discovery. It was not in a wide range he quested, but here and there amongst the pools in the peat bogs and through the long spiked rushes by the streams that gathered out of the hills, as though she were just hidden from him; as though it were her body alone he expected to find, believing in his heart that her spirit was lost to him forever.

As the days of that week went by and no word was heard of her, it was less and less that he looked into the hidden places and further that he wandered, even into Ballybrishlawn and beyond, but without asking, without speaking to any one of what he sought. He was indeed seeking no longer but roaming merely, with no will in the dumb courage of his heart. Sorrow had met him at the door of joy and the falling of his hopes had crushed the spirit of life out of him.

And all that time, Father Roche, secluded in Killanardrish, waited for whatever news there might be.

Towards the end of the week, Mrs. Sheehan laid a letter on his plate at breakfast. It was in Father Costello's writing. Whenever she brought him a letter, she lingered with trivial occupations in the room until he had opened it. In the whole sixteen years she had been there, no post had ever brought any communication to her. If she had relatives, they had no wish to correspond with her. She could have had no interest outside her duties. Like the Parish Priest, she was buried in Killanardrish. It was her only contact with life. In this respect, the post, as it affected his calling and letters from his few remaining relatives, was the only post she knew.

He could have said with truth he had no friends, certainly none that would ever bother themselves to write to him. So it was that whenever she took a letter for him from the postman who drove over every morning from Doonvarna,

and whenever she gave him one on his return journey in the evening, she looked closely at the writing, at the address of those that went away, at the postmark of those that came. Finally she read their contents in the face of Father Roche as she lingered in the room while he perused them.

That morning she lingered until there were no more trivial occupations to be done. As long as her ingenuity provided her with the faintest justification, she waited on and still Father Roche left the letter lying on his plate. It was from Dublin.

Associating one fact in her knowledge with another and, with a dim recollection of having seen the writing before, she had correctly judged it to be from Father Costello. Some thought, deeply rooted in the intuitive functions of her nature, was rousing her curiosity as to this letter, more even than when she had known him to receive a communication from the Bishop respecting his continuation in the parish of Ard-nashiela.

When she had settled the curtains and straightened one of the blinds, when she had picked up a thread of cotton, a feather from the brush she swept with, and a piece of paper from the floor and rolled them into a ball in the hard, thin palm of her hand, the letter was still lying there on his plate.

It was then the pale blue eyes of the Parish Priest lifted from his ham and eggs and for one moment dwelt upon her. She was equal to that look. In this one concentrated and centralised capacity of life, Mrs. Sheehan was a woman of undeviating purpose and infinite resource.

Reading that look as surely as a blind man reads the raised letters beneath his sensitive finger tips, she was neither startled nor perturbed by it. Seeing a little tuft of hair beneath the table from the old spaniel that roamed in a blindness of age about the house, she stooped deliberately and

picked it up. Not obviously she held it in her fingers for him to see before she pressed it away into the collection of litter in her closed hand.

"That dog's losin' his hair with the age he has," said she, "I must take and brush his coat out in the yard."

Not till then did she leave the room and even then not without a last studied glance at the table for his comfort. As soon as she had closed the door, he took up the letter and opened it. If it had been possible for his pulse to beat any the faster, it would have done so at that moment. The faint throb of it never altered.

After the formality of address, the letter continued—

"Perhaps I should have made my confession to you as you suggested when last I saw you at Killanardrish. I have made it since—a more terrible confession than I should have made to you that day and with all the mercy of God, I do not feel that the sin I have brought to another and to myself can ever be taken from me. I am waiting here at the Bishop's discretion and I understand I shall most likely be sent abroad. Perhaps you will have heard by now that a new curate is to take my place."

The Parish Priest admitted to himself it was a plain statement. At least there was no unnecessary emotion about it. He did not whine about the weakness of the flesh. He did not complain of the just retribution that with the sure and merciful hand of the Church had fallen upon him. He did not eat the dust of humility and penitence. Reading the letter again, the old man began to question himself whether in that letter there was any sign of penitence at all. Except that he acknowledged his sin and felt the weight of it, it seemed as though he were considering it more for that other than for himself.

That other——?

Putting the letter away in his pocket, he rang the bell. When Mrs. Sheehan entered, he was quietly finishing his breakfast.

"D'ye remember that man," said he, "came one day about a month ago to see me, had his hat in his hand and played with it the way it might have been an accordion?"

"Fennel—the fisherman from Ardnashiela."

He nodded his head with approval for her memory. If there had been the quality of admiration in him, he would have had it then, but he was much more concerned in giving her the impression that she had revived his memory.

"That's the name of the fella!"

"What's about him?"

"I want him out here to me. Send one of the children from the cottage up the lane. If he comes by the strand he'll be here in two hours."

"Have ye heard something of that girrl?" she asked boldly.

He looked with the directness of a steel blade into her eyes. She felt the sharp point and met it.

"I may hear something," he replied, "if he has anything to tell me. They say he's been roaming the face of the earth since last Sunday."

The sharp point still held her. She knew she would hear no more than that. Without another word, she turned out of the room.

Before the two hours were passed, Father Roche went out of the house. Mrs. Sheehan saw him go and knew there was to be no meeting with Fennel between those walls. There was admiration in her. She smiled. Knowing nothing, but well fed now with nutriment for thought which was as much as could be hoped for in that house, she went on with her work.

Between Killanardrish and the little hamlet of Curragh, Father Roche met Joe Fennel. The fisherman was walking

with the fatigue of a man who has spent the last substance of his energy. As they met, he looked up at the Parish Priest with the heavy want of sleep in his eyes and a weight of despair that dragged about his lips.

"Ye've not found her?" said Father Roche.

"I have not."

"Where have ye looked?"

He mentioned one place and another to which he had been. The exhaustion of mind and body was heavy in the lethargy of his voice.

"Have ye been up in the hills?"

"I have not."

"There are cabins and small farms up there in the North where she might have gone."

"Shure that's a heap of miles away, Father."

"Well—it must be wandering she is. Isn't she?"

"I dunno."

"What d'ye think has happened her yeerself?"

"I dunno."

"Ah—man, shure, ye must think something! Is there nothing she's said to ye gives ye the inklin' of a thought? D'ye think it's dead she is?"

Fennel lifted his eyes wearily and gazed at the priest.

"Yirra, what's the use me sayin' what I think! Wasn't it moithered ye were entirely, the last time I came out here to be talkin' to ye."

Father Roche nodded his head.

"That's the tale, is it?" said he. "'Tis the way the faeries have herself?"

The fisherman made no reply. Of what use was any answer to that? The priest had his learning, but with all his knowledge, he could no more give help or advice here than over the matter of the lobster pots. He turned his eyes away and looked over the sea and was silent.

"'Tis the way ye think she'll never come back?"

Father Roche received no reply.

"What'll ye do if she does?" he persisted. "Is it treatin' her like an outcast ye'll be, for 'tis little mercy or kindness ever I found in the hearts of those would be believin' in the faeries, good or bad? What'll ye do with her the whole savage lot of ye?"

"'Tis I'll see to that," said Fennel and it was the first live note he had spoken in his voice. "She's mine, isn't she?" he added, "whatever way she'd be—isn't she mine?"

Father Roche raised up his hand and dropped it on the fisherman's shoulder.

"God help ye," said he. "'Tis in me prayers I'll have ye this night—I will so."

VII

TEN days had passed. It grew beyond all doubt in Ardnashiela that Mary Kirwan had been spirited away. Fennel at last abandoned his wanderings. As though returning to serve out a sentence of life, he came back to his nets and rowed out one morning round the headlands to lift his lobster pots.

Kirwan alone amongst them all preserved a hope of her return.

He had told no one of his visit to Shaughnessy. Then one evening over the fire in the fisherman's cottage, he spoke of it in a rush of confidence to Fennel. The sheep's blood and the new milk, boiled together and set out on the sill of the door, had disappeared by the next morning. The basin was empty. No wonder he had hope. Even Fennel lifted his eyes from the lethargy of their gaze. If it were possible to propitiate the powers of this hidden world about them, might They not in Their turn make concessions?

The two men sat there, thinking of it in plain terms of human barter and exchange. Something there was, that hidden world demanded of them. There was no denying that. As Fennel thought of it, he remembered that even the Parish Priest had not denied it when they had spoken together on the strand. Father Roche had rigorously opposed his belief that by those same unseen hands his lobster pots had been taken from him. But he had not opposed this. Who other than Themselves, beyond that thin veil of wind and light and darkness and sound, could have taken her away? There were no tangible means here to account for

her disappearance as when the priest had talked of the thieving French trawlers and the grasping wash of the tides.

It seemed to the fisherman in his memory of that meeting, that Father Roche had allowed the truth of what they all knew. Had he not laid his hand on him in a blessing? Had he not promised to have him in his prayers that night?

Sure, he knew of course—he began to say in his mind as his thoughts became more articulate—didn't he know well 'twas taken she was. And was there anything in this world at all a man had that he could say was belonging to him, when always there was Themselves beyond it with the power to take and keep and give back what they took? And God Almighty, what had Himself to do with it? Weren't They, as some believed, the spirits themselves fallen out of Heaven? Hadn't he heard a priest say that once himself? And if it was fallen out of Heaven They were and wandering the ways of the earth, what could frighten Them and drive Them off but the curse of God itself?

And without that, what could a man do, but make his peace with Them? Perhaps with the blessing of God the priest had put on him that night and They liking the little sup of food was put out for Them, perhaps after all They might be giving her back.

He did not know whether he most wished for that or feared it. The thought of her with her wits gone and her beauty disfigured with that aimless look they had who sometimes came back, plunged him into a depth of sadness from which he could not raise his head with hope.

What was it They had wanted with her? He asked that of Kirwan as they sat there over the fire.

"'Tis a young girl has not been touched They'll take," he replied as Shaughnessy had told it him, "'Tis a young girrl ready for her bed with the man has chosen her They

do always be wantin' for the child she could give Them-selves."

Fennel bent his head and rocked himself to and fro where he sat.

All he had thought that evening came out in the truth of what happened. There was a man came wandering over from Doonvarna to Ardnashiela. He was one of those clowning men who go from house to house, arraying themselves from the bundle they carry in the bedraggled garments of a jester, singing songs and cracking obscene jokes between the fair at one place and the fair at another. A penny here, a penny there, sometimes a meal and sometimes a night's lodging they earned for themselves. On his way from Doonvarna, he had been up in the hills amongst the scattered farms that are hidden there in the glens and valleys.

It was this man, when he heard what they were all talking of in Ardnashiela, brought news of Mary Kirwan. He had heard of a girl, he said, was seen in the hills, she going from one place to another asking her bread and offering the work of her hands for those would give her a roof over her head and some straw to be sleeping on.

They sent for Fennel who was in his cottage and for Kirwan too and stood about them in a crowd as they talked.

He had not heard what way she was, but that her clothes were torn on her and the soles of her boots broken with the long walking she had had.

"Did she give her name at all at anny place?" asked Kirwan.

"She did not," said the clown.

Fennel touched his arm.

"Was it lost in her wits she was?" he asked.

"Shure, what sense would she hev to be wanderin' like

that with a house and good food and she starvin' would be tearin' at the bread they gave her in her hands!"

When there were some ready to go with Fennel on his search, he turned round upon them all and the light he had in his eyes drove them back.

"Let ye go on with year talk," said he, "and himself there makin' his jokes for ye. I'll find what belongs to me. With meself alone I'll find it."

They stood in a group, watching him as he went up the street. There was no new life that was in him as he walked, but they could all see by his steps that nothing would stay him in his walking till he found her.

By midday he had begun his searching amongst the hills of Doon. They are a long range, rising to sharp spurs, falling to deep valleys for twenty miles inland. Miles distant from each other, the farms are scattered wherever a moderate pasture is to be found. Even there only the hardiest breed of sheep can face the winter storms off the Atlantic and a cow grazing is never to be seen except in the most sheltered valley and then only in the summer and the autumn months.

The desolation of the West of Ireland broods over the crests and glens of the hills of Doon, a solitary desolation with its voice in the screaming buzzards that swoop and hover and climb the air in eddying circles all day long amongst the crags. In some of the valleys, strewn with fallen rocks from the heights above, a littered playground of the games of giants, it would seem as if the feet of men had never trod. Never a sheep strays there. Never a voice but that of the wheeling buzzard is heard in the still heights of the air. For an hour or so at noon the sun lights them with a passing warmth and the shadows fall again, sweeping up the sides of the hills, chill and blue.

Before the night had fallen, Fennel had found the first

place where Mary had been seen. It was a farm house in an open hollow, free to the sun for the better part of the day and leaning against the hillside that rose sharply from the walls themselves at the back of the house.

The flames of sunset were burning in its meagre windows as he saw it when he came round an outer bend of the hills. He had been walking for six hours and apart from the two cabins where he had asked his questions and the one farm where he had stayed for a drop of milk to quench his thirst, he had seen but one man gathering a few sheep on the slopes. None of them had seen or heard of any young girl in those parts. What would a girl want walking there? They had looked at him queerly and watched him away from their doors when he went.

He was thinking in a dull wonder, confused with fatigue, where he could lay his head that night for the sleep he felt coming over him when, turning the bend of the hills into the open hollow, he saw the farm. His feet led him there. No volition was in his thoughts. It was his body seeking for sleep. His mind was too inert to care whether he rested well or ill.

A dog barked in answer to his knocking. A moment later an old man opened the door, but offered no invitation for him to come within. Fennel stood out on the hillside, swaying a little, like a drunken man who is fast losing all pride in himself to hide the stupor of his condition.

Not until he had explained where he had come from and his purpose out there in the wastes of the hills did the old man admit him. Even then it was with quick glances of suspicion. He behaved like an animal disturbed in his lair, moving here and there about his room and watching Fennel always, who neither cared nor observed his manner one way or another.

It was little the old farmer had seen of Mary. Such as

it was, he told in short statements made between long intervals of silence while he ate his food and later, when they were sitting over the fire, while he sucked at his pipe. He was as uncommunicative as an owl in a barn. Twenty-five years he had lived in that place and for most of them he had been alone, raising his sheep and going down two or three times a year to the fairs. Between one fair and another, he scarcely saw a human soul. He was seventy-one. He had no wish for company now.

"Shure, what's the good of this one or that," he mumbled in his beard, "wouldn't they be grabbin' from ye all times? And there's little a man can spare out of a thin field of grass and a few sheep wearing down the hillsides with their eating."

It seemed Mary had come late one evening, knocking on his door.

"A girrl of a woman," he described her, "with a long look in her eyes."

It was many years since he had seen a strange woman wandering in those hills. Indeed, had he ever seen one at all? He had felt the want of shutting the door in her face. Only for the way she looked at him, he would have done so, for he was a quiet man and had the use of his lonesomeness after all those years.

"When was this?" asked Fennel. The fear that was now more than ever in him to be finding her, alone kept him from following at once and wherever he might be told she had gone. His fatigue left him as he listened. She had been there. She had been there at the door where he was standing a short while since. But how long ago was it and where was she now?

He had to repeat his question before he could get an answer. Then he was told it was more than a week ago.

She had asked for a bite of food, a sup of milk and some

place to be lying down in till the morning. She was used to the work on a farm, she had said, and would be doing any thing he cared to set her hands to. It was not money she wanted or any real thing at all but food only and a place for the sleep was hanging on her.

"Did she say where it was she was going?" asked Fennel.

She had said no more apparently than just that she was going away, but where from and where to, the farmer had not learnt in the short words he had spoken to her.

The fisherman hid his face in his hands. If any conviction of his beliefs were needed, this was the last that would be given him. That morning after the threshing feast, when he had spoken to her in the yard she had been eager that they should be married soon. If it was seeking to go away she was, what else could it be but Thémselfes that had led her astray.

More than a week ago! Where was she now? He sat with his elbows fastened to his knees, his hands clenched against his cheek-bones, still, as if he had been chiselled out of wood. He said no other word and waited till all was told him.

The farmer had given her some food, potatoes he had cooked for himself and milk there was from his cow. She had sat in that chair where the fisherman was sitting then. Her clothes were good on her at that time, but it was easy seen there was little dryness in them for it had been misting and wet for three days in the hills.

He had asked her would she sleep there in the chair where she was or out in the shed by the yard where he kept his cow. And it was out in the shed she said she'd go. When she had found a piece of hay for herself to be lying on, he left her there and it was little comfort he had in himself that night to think of what a girl like that could be doing, wandering in the hills, or the way she might be putting a

spell on the place with the strange look she had in her eyes.

It was when he went to the shed in the morning that he found some food cut up for his cow and the beast herself milked with the milk standing in a bucket against the wall. But only for the cow and a small cat he had, the shed was empty.

He thought she had surely stolen some of the milk. But when he took it into the house and measured it, there was nearly a cupful more than any drop he had got out of that beast since she had calved in the pitch of summer.

"'Twas findin' her gone," said he, "and more milk there in the bucket than ever I'd had at anny time, has been botherin' me since to know what she was at all."

He looked across at Fennel to hear what it was he could be told about her. The fisherman's head had sunk down between his wrists. He was away in sleep.

VIII

WITH the daylight that came stepping from one hill's spur to another down the whole range of Doon, Fennel left the farm the next morning. Now he was upon the path of his quest. By noontime, when the sun was falling in the valleys, he had discovered evidence in three more places of the way that Mary had gone.

Closer and closer through the length of that day he came to her, following her down to the earth on which at last he found her.

That second night he slept in a shepherd's hut. An old man and his wife lived there beneath the leaking thatch. God alone knew, he told the fisherman, how he scraped together the means of life, minding sheep for a man who lived in the townland. The old woman, his wife, sat listening to their talking and said no word all the hours that Fennel was beneath the roof.

It was only two days before they had seen Mary. The shepherd was on the hillside minding his sheep when she appeared out of the crags of the big rocks. At first sight of her, he had crossed himself and sped a swift prayer to the Mother of God. Her clothes were torn on her, the times she had fallen climbing over the sharp stones. Her boots were worn the way the soles were breaking away from them. But it was only food she said she wanted and no rest at all to be getting on with her walking.

He would not find her that night, the shepherd told him, with the little light that was left in the sky. There was no

moon at that time. It was not safe for a man that did not know his way, walking about the hills in the darkness, for there were deep hollows he might be falling into and lakes of black water where a stone that was flung would never reach the bottom for the great depth they had in them.

So he slept that night as he had slept before, sitting in a chair by the fire with his head hung on his chest and his hands folded in his lap. In the first pallid, grey light of the next morning, he set out again into a mist the hills had gathered. A dumb, sensing instinct guided him. He became as a dog with a scent in its nostrils. Blind reason told him she must continue the direction she had chosen. He had no thought to construct that direction as it may have been in her mind. Had she had any direction at all? None that he could imagine or suppose. Yet always upon one course her movements had seemed to have been made. From the different places where she had been seen or heard of, it was persistently away from Ardnashiela she had gone. Persistently, as when a dog runs with its nose to the earth, he followed that course, turning now to the right and now to the left, wherever there was a hollow or a glen to hide her. But it was always away from Ardnashiela he went and always the traces he had found of her had led him still further on.

For the whole of that third morning, he saw no living thing, or was there sight of any habitation. It was the barren waste of the hills the shepherd had warned him of. No food was there for beast or man. Here it was now he felt the despair of finding her. From all the description the shepherd had given him of her condition when she had begged him on the hillside for a piece of bread, he knew she must have been too spent to reach the nearest farm, five miles away from the shepherd's cottage. But where amongst

the stony gaps and hollows of those hills could he look for her?

He sat down on a stone that had cut itself a resting place in the earth and, slowly spreading his hands over his face, he began sobbing with low moaning sounds that were torn resistingly from him in that vast breadth of silence. Fatigue of mind and body was too heavy on him to keep them back. The more he struggled with them, the more bitter and despairing was the wrench of sound escaping from between his hands.

It was well into the third day now that he had been looking for her in the hills and it was the fatigue of his despair more than the exhaustion of his body that was overcoming him. For a long while he sat there and a shame of his sobbing kept his hands pressed hard against his face. It was not courage that had come to him when he rose to his feet again, but a greater despondency than had been with him before.

He felt now as he walked, there was no compassion or mercy in the world at all; that not only the unseen powers about him but the hand of God itself was cruel and malignant. In all that time since Mary had disappeared, he had said prayers on his knees, prayers as he walked, vague, incoherent mutterings of his soul, but cries he felt in some consistency of his belief that would reach in an intelligible fashion to the hearing of God.

So far now was he past the mystery and mercy of prayer that suddenly as he was walking, he stopped his feet on the hillside and flung back his head to the sight of the sky.

"God damn the ways of God!" he cried.

As he fell to a trembling at the sound of his words that had burst like a thunder from the silence about him rather than come from himself, he saw some black thing, lying on the ground, a distance away from him. In a nausea of

fear he walked to it and picked it up. It was a piece of cloth—a piece of a shawl—torn with ragged edges. It was from Mary's shawl. He had no reason from this trace of her for supposing it, but he knew he was near her then.

Quickly here and there he began running, calling her name. All the full energy of his mind for the search had returned to him. It was as though his nature had gone back to the merest elemental functions he possessed.

"Mary! Mary! Mary!" he cried out and more than ever it was like a dog he was, lifting his voice, hot and close upon the pursuit of its quarry.

In a sunken pit of the hills where the night before she must have stumbled and fallen, he found her lying. A mere heap of clothes she looked, with her face turned to the earth and a loose arm flung with her fall across the half-hidden outline of her cheek.

He knelt at her side, whispering her name. She did not answer. He turned her gently over. Her face was still. There was a strange peace about it and none of the disfigurement he had feared to find. It was paler than he had ever seen it before. That was all. Hunger was in it, even as she slept, if that unconsciousness was sleep. There was pain too that hurt in his heart as he looked at her. But there was no madness.

He lifted her up in his arms. She lay there with her dead weight and her head limply fell from the neck against his shoulder.

From the height of the hills where he stood, he could see across the waste miles of bog-land to the green country of the scattered fields. With a focussing of his eyes he picked out the spot where the walls of Kirwan's farm made a point of white against the edge of the sea. Ten miles he reckoned it, going direct across the peat bogs—ten miles! Turning his face there, he settled her in his arms. With the

new strength that had come to him, he shifted her as though she were a baby. Then he strode down the side of the hill with the exultant joy of his burden.

Late that night he knocked at Kirwan's door, and when they took her out of his arms he stood leaning against the lintel of the door and laughed as a man laughs when he has won a game of chance, or cheated the devil, as they say.

IX

MARY KIRWAN lay on her bed for three days passing and repassing from the faint light of consciousness into a deep obscurity of mind and body, more profound than sleep and from which at times in their ignorance it seemed to them she would never return.

"'Tis Themselves still have her," said Kirwan, "and only her body is left he brought back into the house. Yirra, wouldn't it have been better if himself had never found her at all, than she lyin' there through the days and nights to be tormentin' us all with her sickness."

For those three days, he fretted the house with his complaining in the hearing of all but Fennel, yet he would not go near her himself. There was a fear he had of her now and could not hide it. Fearing with him was to hate the thing he feared. His tongue was bitter when he talked of her. By the quiet of his fire, when the fisherman was not there, he openly supposed that Fennel would never marry her now.

"How the hell would he know what he was gettin' for a wife!"

This was the summing up of his opinions on that matter. He would have married no girl himself under such circumstances, but he swore in his next breath he would make the whole village drive Fennel from the street if he deserted Mary when her sickness was passed.

There was no foundation in anything Fennel had said or done for the spleen of these conjectures. They were

the voice of Kirwan's fear speaking. He had no regard for the justice of what he said. Each of those three days the fisherman came down to the farm and sat in the kitchen, his eyes never leaving that door leading into the room where Mary lay, his hands hardly a moment still in their readiness to be doing any service Mrs. Kirwan might require of them.

Here as well as when he had sought for her in the hills, he was like a dog—a dog guarding a door. The functions of scent, the quick ear for sound, these were of no benefit to him now. Like a dog with all the alertness of its instincts in the open field, he was helpless in a house of sickness. Like a dog, whenever Mary passed into those drifting moments of consciousness, Mrs. Kirwan called him to the door to see her and much in the manner of a faithful beast he came, inarticulate, smiling only, a smile that slowly left his lips and stole out of his face when Mary's eyes no more than stared at him across the distance of the room. As they closed again, he would turn away and go back in a patience of waiting to his chair in the kitchen. So it continued for three days.

Those moments of consciousness to Mary were moments of torturing pain. With each one as it came, she felt as if she were a soul returning to the agony of life from which of her own will, she believed she had set her body free. With deep breaths of relief she sank back into the darkness of unconsciousness. With tremors that shuddered through all her body she returned to those instances of sensation again.

The moment of that night when she had fallen into the hollow in which Fennel had found her, had seemed the last, the end of suffering, the infinite mercy of release. Finding herself stumbling, then falling down and down, she had cried out in her voice. It was no cry of fear. A moment's

physical revulsion of pain and violence may have forced a note in it. Deep in her soul it was a cry of welcome for the end. The darkness like water had poured over her. For a while, as she lay there with her senses lingering, she was just conscious that an unending peace was coming. Then it had swept over her.

With the first opening of her eyes, lying on that bed where she had thrown herself the evening when Father Costello had left the house after the blind man's story, where she had wakened to reality after the night of the threshing feast, she knew they had snatched her peace from her. For a while it came back, torturing her with its mercy. Then consciousness again, her mother moving in the room, the sight of that honest man at the door, the sound of her father's voice quickening her to her old fears of him across the silence of the house.

How could she bear it! How could she come back! Why had they not left her alone! Who had found her there, where she thought she was hidden from all life in the desolate wastes of those hills? She was gone—firmly she had believed she was gone for ever—with the joy and the sorrow of shame, with the knowledge of her good and her evil and no regret or remorse for all that had been. She had surrendered herself without complaint to the inevitability of its ending. With all this she thought she had departed from them there in Ardnashiela, never to see them again.

In some vague purpose of her mind, she had formed the indefinite plan of finding work to earn her money enough to pay her passage on a ship to America. This had held her together. Just this ambiguous project had had substance enough in her mind to urge her on. Each day it had become fainter. She had known she was nearing the end of her strength. The last day of all, before Fennel

had found her, it was death only she craved for then. And it had come. That was the moment of death, the utmost mercy of it, when she stumbled and fell in the darkness. She had escaped from them. She would never have to tell them the truth. She would never see them again.

So when first her eyes had opened in that room, when first she saw her mother moving and heard about her in the distance the familiar sounds of the house, she had cried faintly in terror and turned her face sharply to the wall. When Mrs. Kirwan came to her side at the sound of that cry, it was to find her unconscious once more. The wrench of that moment had brought its own release with its pain. She had drifted back into the compassion of oblivion.

But gradually as the days went by, those moments of sensation became longer. For an hour sometimes, and sometimes through the length of the night, she would lie with her eyes open, scheming, conceiving, planning what it was she could say. For surely in the strange wonder of all that had happened to her, it seemed the truth must be known. There was her child. She could not hide that. There must be a child. The whole passion of her nature in its ignorance told her that. In those moments with the priest she had been lifted in an overwhelming ecstasy to the high summit of human experience. What other result in her mind could there be than this? It was enough that she knew it. And how could she hide it from them?

One thought only obsessed her. She must save the man she loved.

Gradually through those days, in the moments of her consciousness, a story formulated itself out of the contriving of her invention. She had been for a walk along the Doonvarna road. In the Gap, a man had come towards her on his way into Ardnashiela. Had she given herself to his blandishments? Had he taken her by force? She

cared little which it was, yet the human instincts of self-protection prevailed. Out of her imagination she pictured him with meticulous care. There was a shrewdness and a cunning even in her, she had not known she possessed. Every word he had said, she prepared in her mind. The touch of his hands, his violence, the horror of what had happened, the dull shame when it was past had sped her with terror into the hills, wandering away from them, afraid to return. All this she visioned and stamped with the lasting picture of it upon her memory.

These inventions came to be a fierce joy to her, a joy of vengeance for the bitter cruelty of those who had brought her back. When in those three days the chilled sanity of her normal condition returned, she often feigned oblivion, lest they should begin to ask their questions before she was fully prepared. And then, on the evening of the third day, when her door had been left open and that into the kitchen also stood ajar, she heard the voices of her father and Fennel talking by the fire. An impulse of curiosity, combined with the purpose of her plan, urged her to creep from her bed and listen. At the hinge of the door she stood, holding her breath and hearing her heart beats pulse across the sound of their voices.

"And what'll we be doin' with herself at all," Kirwan was saying, "if 'tis the way she never overs it and she lyin' there through the long stretch of the days and nights?"

There was no answer from Fennel. It was her mother who replied in a quietness of conviction:

"Ah—shure, she'll over it. Wish, there's many have a sickness like that, the way the length of the days would cure 'em of it."

What did she mean? That quietness and sureness of

voice—those words she had said—“length of the days would cure ’em of it?”

Could she know and did she believe it was time that would heal the pain in her heart? Mary’s suspicions were roused. Here she came to that first acquaintance with conscience that was to live on now for always with a constant distress in her soul. She trembled as she stood there listening. Could the blind man have heard that night of the threshing feast, when their steps, their bodies and for that one instant of delirious joy, their lips had been together before she fell in his arms? With all the sharpness of his remaining senses and notwithstanding the darkness that was upon his eyes, could he have known what had happened then? Could he have spoken of it to her mother? If he had spoken to her, might he not have spoken to others? Father Costello had gone away the same night that she had gone. Had he come back? Would he ever come back? What had they thought of his going? The voice of fear lifted now in tune with the voice of her conscience. They both fell to stillness as she heard Fennel begin to speak.

“If it was in the hills They took her,” he said, “and I findin’ her there and carryin’ her here, ’tis surely givin’ her back They are, and whatever sickness there is is on her, there’s no need for ye, James Kirwan, to be spoilin’ yeerself with the fret of havin’ her in this place. ’Twas her word she gave me before They led her astray and I’m holdin’ to that, whatever way she is.”

In a bewilderment of sudden realisation, Mary crept back to her bed. Through the open doors from the kitchen came the ticking of the old clock and the muffled murmur of their voices. All her impulse of curiosity was at rest. She had heard enough. It was the faeries they thought had taken her.

Knowing all she knew and confronted in this manner with the merciful error of their beliefs, she found herself suddenly wondering which was true and which was false.

Was this Their meaning? Was this what had happened to Shawn Geoghan's wife? Was it life or love or good or evil that took people away, as she had been taken? Or were there faeries indeed as she had always believed there to be?

Her mind, her intelligence, failed her to pursue the thoughts that crowded by. She lay in the darkness there in her bed, knowing but one thing in any certainty of comprehension.

There was no need for the lies of her story. Was she glad of that? It seemed to her that she was; yet now again her conscience was stirring to a comfortless awakening. What was she doing? She was letting them tell the lie—the lie of their beliefs. What was there wrong in that? Something seemed wrong, yet she could not discover how. One certain thing there was. The truth must be kept from them. That she did not question. Then why not let them think on what they believed. Was it because it was easier? Did her conscience torment her with that?

She drifted into a dazed confusion of thought. They believed the faeries had taken her. Well—they believed. Let them believe.

Sleep came and parted her from her conscience.

X

MARY was sitting up in bed the next morning when her mother came into the room.

Mrs. Kirwan smiled. There was the same distance in her smile, the same remoteness about her eyes. If there was anything she knew, neither Mary nor any other living soul could have read it there in her face.

"Didn't I know ye'd 'over it," she said and she seated herself at the foot of the bed, steadying her eyes on Mary's face with that inscrutable expression on her own which always had seemed vacant and meaningless till now.

With this new life of Mary's conscience that had slept when she slept and wakened with her when she awoke, the old world that had been about her was altered, transformed. All truly was as she had left it. What seemed to have happened was as if the light which once had presented everything to her perceptions, fell now conversely upon all she saw. No more than in the sound of his voice and the few words she had heard him say in the kitchen, she beheld her father differently. Even Fennel, with his simple honesty, was not the same. From the dim and indiscernible woman, her mother had suddenly come forth to her in the sharpness of light. It was not wholly that Mary understood her, but that instead of fading away into an obscurity of dull shadow, she saw her now, invested in poignant meaning, clear and defined, but beyond the capacity of her analytical investigation.

It was life itself that had educated her. All in that short time, she had passed through the inflexible school of expe-

rience, swiftly fashioned by it, remoulded, re-made—a different being in her soul's vision from that girl who had milked her father's cows and danced with quick laughter to the sound of the fiddle at the threshing feasts. In mental compound she was the same. She had been taught not how to think, but how to feel, and all the equipment of intelligence she possessed sharpened and refashioned itself for the change that had come to her.

They had brought her back from the merciful release of death. No thought came to her of seeking to escape them again, but life had no longer any meaning for her. One thing alone held her to a clear purpose of being. She had heard herself crying it aloud in her dreams; through every waking hour it sounded itself in her ears. They should never know! Never should they know the truth. She had no doubt of her power or her endurance against all suspicion to keep that from them.

When her mother sat down at the foot of her bed and the impassivity of her eyes with the faint smile that played about them fell like a shadow upon Mary's eyes, she met their look with the steady gaze of her soul's assurance. Whatever that look might mean, she could oppose it. Even when Mrs. Kirwan in that empty quiet of her voice asked her what it was had taken her up there into those starving gaps of the hills, though her breath caught as she drew it and in her throat she swallowed the swift rising of her fear, it was still with all the outward signs of composure and a quick assumption of perplexity that she made her reply.

"Was it in the hills they found me?" she asked.

Mrs. Kirwan told her the story of Fennel's search

"'Twas ten miles he carried ye in his arms," she concluded. "Wasn't it comin' to the door here he was one night, with yeerself the weight of a dead thing, the way

he was broken entirely to be holdin' ye. 'I have her back from Them,' he said, and there was every one of us heard him but himself, he laughin' and sittin' down like a man would never be risin' to the day again."

This was the new Fennel she was finding with greater pity than she had ever felt for him before and a clearer warmth of perception in her understanding. She remembered the distant sight she had had of the farm that day which the night had ended for her. That was the last vision she had believed she would ever have of Ardnashiela. He had carried her from there. In his arms he had carried her. Her eyes glittered and her lip trembled. Other arms had held her. It was that she remembered. It was because of that she understood.

"What brought ye that way at all?" asked Mrs. Kirwan without the note of persistence.

"I was walkin'."

"Where?"

"On the road to Doonvarna."

"Shure, why?"

"Faith, I dunno. 'Twas walkin' I was when the work was finished and there was nothin' to be doin' in the house."

"What happened ye then?"

The glitter in Mary's eyes gave swift place to a dull resistance.

"Yirra, I dunno what happened me. Was it knowin' anything at all I was when he found me?"

"Ye were not—but hadn't ye been walkin' ten days and more in the hills, the time ye were askin' a drop of milk and a bit of bread in one place and some straw to be lyin' on in another? Wasn't it findin' it that way himself came up with ye?"

The impassive eyes were still dwelling upon her. The quiet incurious voice was beginning to beat like a pulse in

her brain. With the fatigue and weakness of body that was still fretting her as she lay there, she felt herself assailed by the even flow of these questions. It was like water dropping with a regular and unceasing patter as it fell. She knew she was not nerved then to resist its gradual attrition. In the end it would wear away the stone of her reserve.

"What is it ye're askin' me for!" she cried out. "How would I know what happened me? Wasn't it walkin' I was—that's all I'd know against the time I'd be wakin' up here in the bed. 'Tis the wits ye think I've lost on me, maybe. Well—maybe it is! Shure, God knows what might happen to anny one in the silence of that place!"

She flung herself down in a passion of resentment upon her pillow and buried her face from the quiet look of her mother's eyes.

Mrs. Kirwan stood up from the bed.

"God help ye," she said. "'Tis queer indeed the ways He have with all of us. Shure, the wits were gone from ye—they were of course. Isn't it easy they be goin' from a woman and a hard life indeed for those would be brought back?"

In the muffled retreat of her pillow, Mary heard her. She heard her leave the room, never to know what that strange woman had meant by her words, the last she ever spoke to her daughter about those days of her disappearance.

Closing the door of Mary's bedroom, she went out into the kitchen. It was early in the day, but Fennel was already waiting there.

"She's overed it," said Mrs. Kirwan indifferently.

He thanked God with more than the words that sprang from him.

"Can I see herself so?" he asked.

She nodded her head to the door.

"Let ye mind," said she as he went. "Let ye mind not to be askin' herself the way They took her that night. 'Tis light like a feather itself her wits are. Shure, ye would blow them away with a word if ye questioned her. And don't be frettin' her with the word she gave. Let herself speak that if she's a mind for it. Those the faeries have taken are queer when they come back—'tis queer they are for a long time. Why wouldn't they? Yirra, God help them—why wouldn't they?"

He took the handle of the door and turned it. Stifling the heavy fall of his feet to the stillness that had come about his heart, he crept into the room.

XI

FENNEL closed the door. Mary was still lying with her face pressed against the pillow. He waited. Her bare arm lay out on the bed. Her hair was about her shoulders. He had plucked her back to him from the world beyond the thin veil of wind and light. She was his. He stood there with a great longing in him for words that had a meaning for the surging sense of his gratitude. He knew none. She was there, back again out of the dark emptiness of those days when he was searching in a deserted world. There was no wandering in her mind to be disfiguring her. She was the same as when that time of their first meeting he had thought there was no hope in the world for any man to be claiming her. One day when her health came back, there would be the same look of kindness in her eyes. He would come back from his fishing and find her at his open door. She would be beside the table with him as they ate their food. By the fire she would sit with him and there would be no more lonesomeness in the house.

His eyes rested on her there to assure him of the truth of it all. There she was lying. It was true. When she looked up from her pillow, the remembrance of him would be coming back into her eyes. She had passed the hours of her sickness. She was well again.

With a sudden voice of memory, he heard himself cursing the ways of God on the hillside. Remorse shook him. There was a swift alarm in his heart to think how that curse might fall upon himself. Out of the silence of his

standing there, he moved quickly to the side of the bed and fell clumsily upon his knees. When Mary looked up, his head was thrust into his hands that were buried in the clothes of the bed.

When he had remained there some little time, she raised her hand without thought of her reason, but just because a sudden gentleness had come to her, seeing him there at his praying—she raised her hand and laid it on his head.

"What is it ye have in yeer prayers?" she whispered.

He looked up. It was this gentleness from her he had known was coming to him. The faint touch of her hand awed him. Had the little painted statue of the Virgin in the chapel descended from Her altar and laid her hand on him he could scarcely have felt more subjection of humility.

"I cursed the ways of God," he said, and told her all the despair, the hope, the agony of mind, the fears he had had when the faeries had taken her from him.

Without comment or question, in a dumb silence of wonder at the endurance in his heart, she lay on her pillow listening to the simple story of his belief and the fate of her they all accepted in the undoubting sincerity of their minds.

Scarcely did she reckon the effect it had upon her. She did not realise how still, with every word of his story, she was being submitted to the education of life; nor did she comprehend the might and meaning of those forces, powerful beyond all her conception, working, actuating, controlling them at the root of their beliefs.

It was not laughter she felt when she heard the story of the man with the cloven foot, who had played at cards with her father on the road, that night of her disappearance. Yet she could have laughed, shrilly, hysterically, with no merriment. Her fingers gripped in the substance

of the pillow beneath her head to keep that laughter from her lips.

Back again and again across her thoughts as she listened to him, came the memory of Father Costello's words to her that day in the kitchen with the shame he had flung at her for believing the story of Shawn Geoghan's wife.

There were no faeries! There was no unseen world beyond them! She did not argue it with herself. She knew it as she heard the story of her going that stumbled from Fennel's lips. Life, if that was life—what had happened to herself and she knew must happen to others—this was what lay beyond them all; this was what took them away; this was what troubled some the way their wits seemed to be gone from them, who had mad laughter in their eyes and whose lips babbled the foolishness of words.

She knew then how nearly that had been the way with her. Another day in those hills and reason surely would have left her. No—she did not believe in faeries any more. Then what was there in which she could believe? This, in a sudden illumination of thought she asked herself, pointing the question, an accusing finger, at her heart.

She believed in the priest. She believed in all the joy and pain and suffering and ecstasy she had felt that night in his arms. She believed in the child she knew must be the meaning of all that had happened to her. If that was life—then her beliefs lay there, for the need of belief pressed hard upon her. Without it, the thought of the days and years had nothing but terror for her soul. There was the Almighty God and the pity and mercy of the Virgin Mary. But could they bring him back to her? Would she ever hear again the words, burning with unbelievable wonder, so utterly new and unknown to her, he had cried in her ears that night in the darkness of the hills? She knew

she could never hear them from him or any man again. Was it through all of time she must go on believing in the silence that would be about her? Could that belief continue to uphold her until they brought her body to lay it away in that ground up on the hill?

In the midst of Fennel's story, she broke into a terror of weeping. He stopped at once, amazed and concerned. He had said too much. Not once had he questioned her. But he had said too much. This was the lightness of her wits that had blown away with the words of his talking.

"Oh, shure, God help me—'tis a fool I am!" he muttered helplessly. He stared down at her, sobbing convulsively, wondering what it was he could do when, bewildering him with the surprise of it, she turned suddenly in the bed and flung her arms about him. He had a quick sight of her face stained with tears and the next moment it was hidden with the mass of her hair against his coat. Both her arms and her hands were clutching at him. She was crying in an agony like a child in mortal dread. He tried to listen to what she was saying. Her sobs muffled and choked the sound of her words.

"Keep me! Keep me!" he thought he heard her say and in a distress of perplexity he looked about him.

Was it They were trying to take her from him then? "Keep me—keep me!" What did she mean but that? And then it seemed she was begging him to hold her, close and fast in his arms. If that could keep her from Them, there was no man's arms so strong for holding as his. The iron muscles flexed and hardened as he caught her to him. Not one thought of passion had he as he felt the softness of the body he had in his arms. Closely and with no yielding of his grasp, he held her to him till her sobs broke, shivered and died away and she was lying still like a child saved from the terror of darkness against his breast, with faint

intaken breaths that told the passing of the storm about her.

"Is it the way ye're goin' to marry me after all that hev happened me?" she asked, her voice still broken with quick, involuntary breaths. "Is it ever a girrl has been taken a man would wish to be livin' with through the stretch of his days?"

"I dunno what men there are," said he, "would give up the peace that was gone from them, once they had it back again in the holt of their arms."

She trembled, partly in gratitude, mostly in fear. The utmost was yet for knowing. Nothing could shake her conviction she was going to have a child. It was a truth, an indelible reality to her. She allowed no doubt of it in her mind. No woman who had known what she had known, who had been carried to that high crest of joy, could descend alone the same woman she had been.

Would his belief encompass that? She slipped with a quick determination out of his arms. It must be then he must know; better then than dragged from her later. She did not wish to hide it. There was no alarm in her to conceal that which must ultimately be known. They should never have the truth, but this must be heard.

With a look in her eyes, now bright with hardness to encounter all that might befall her, she told him the thing her instinct knew.

Strangely to him it seemed she told it. He thought her defiance was that lingering of the spell they had put upon her. If for one instant the truth had ever occurred to him, it would have been shame he would have expected in a woman with such a confession as that. But not for one moment did it enter his thoughts. Nothing could alter his belief of the power that unseen world had over the ways of men. Something was demanded of them. It took away

and it gave back. In all their lives it swayed with a meaning there was not one who could explain.

She had been taken by Them. However long the days had been when she was away, it was few they were for any girl to be having such knowledge of herself as this. How could she have learnt it, unless it was away with Themselves she had been? He neither argued this nor did he hear one conscious utterance of it in his thoughts. It was that which Shaughnessy had said They had wanted with her. What man was it could feel he had been robbed by Them? They had given her back. She was there to the touch of his hand with the kindness of life she could still be bringing to him.

He looked back into the defiance of her eyes and, as though he were speaking of a world of time behind them, he said:

"There's no more word we'll have of it. Shure, if 'tis in the comin' of a day or so the priest says the words over us, won't they think 'tis me own child ye'll be havin' the way they can't be pointin' a finger at it or whisperin' anny strange talk at all."

She lay on her elbow and stared in a wonder at him.

Was it like that she had once believed herself?

PART IV

I

IN places like Ardnashiela, time is not visibly to be associated with change. It is so approximately related to a process of transmutation as to conceal all sign of progress and give to those whose eyes chance that way the thought that there life is stagnant, swept by an eddy of the stream into a still pool where the stray flotsam on the current drifts in to remain until it rots away in waste.

Change nevertheless is working. For all its tranquillity life is not still. The great and invariable process continues in Ardnashiela as elsewhere. Ever persistently the washing tides gnaw their way into the crumbling land around the low shore. From one year to another the fields between Kirwan's farm and the sea varied imperceptibly in outline and substance. With secret burrowings and submerged excavations, the long roll of the Atlantic waves worked at the foundations of the mightiest battlements of the cliffs. No fruits of that labour were apparent. Only the sound of the hammer blows, like a thunder far beneath the land sometimes when the storms were off the sea, were to be heard and these, so persistently, so monotonously, that they lost all sense of that slowly moving process of change.

From year to year nothing happened and then suddenly one day a giant rock would shift in the clamp of the soil. No one was out there on those headlands to watch it. As though it were a blast in the quarrying of time, it leaped from its holding. Down with a roar into the sea it rushed in one instant of bounding freedom and all the light earth and clinging satellites of smaller stones that had depended

upon it for their existence of place in that vast structure of the cliffs, fell in a cloud, a dust, a fume of the sudden cataclysm after it.

Who was there to know what had happened who had not heard the uproar of that sudden calamity of change? A sea-pink uprooted, withering to death, a cloud of dust upon the rocks soon licked off by the curling tongues of water, a gaping wound in the face of the cliff swiftly made whole by the healing winds and the restoring rains and eager plant life finding a hold again in the loosened earth, what was there to show of the gradual labour of time wrought to a climax in that one instant of disintegration?

In such secretive measures time moves and change effects its inexorable purpose. Where, as in Ardnashiela, life seems stillest, there yet is the ever-onward progress of adventure in a mutable world.

Within two days of her recovery, Mary Kirwan was married to Fennel, the fisherman. The words were said over them by Father Roche in the little church that stands in the open place above the sea-wall at the end of the village street.

Marriages in Ardnashiela were usually rowdy ceremonies. There was laughter even in church and much jesting. Often the feast afterwards, broken with dancing, sometimes amounting to wild horse-play, was little less than a drunken debauch. In Ardnashiela, numbering some two hundred souls, there were five cottages with the license to sell drink and tobacco painted up over their doors. A living was to be found for all of them.

"There's not a man," Father Roche had once said in a sweeping condemnation, "there's not a man in Ardnashiela has a soul with the courage to face the Lord God without he had a drop of drink taken to stiffen him."

At Mary's marriage there was none of this, no laughter,

no jesting flung, no feast, to Kirwan's profound satisfaction, in the kitchen at night. There was a hush of wonder over them all, some seeing her for the first time since her disappearance, as she had knelt at the altar that day. With open lips and following eyes they had watched her out of the church and, in a crowd at the foot of the cliff road, had stood gaping after her as she walked with her man up to her new home.

Some had said it was more than they would do themselves to be marrying one had the strange name to herself with the queer things had happened her. Some had said it must be mad in love he was, seeing that those who had once had the touch of Them were never the same again after it. All of them wondered at the courage of him and there were looks of pity Mary had cast upon herself and looks of awe as she had walked out of the church.

"'Tis gone from himself yet again she'll be," said the old man who had lived once in the islands off the coast of Galway. "Those that are once taken only come back for a time. For the stretch of a year he may have her and maybe 'tis more, but 'tis not Themselves'll leave her with him for long."

He had waited for a pause in their talk to say his words so that every one might hear them. They nodded their heads, for it was an old man like himself who had seen long days in the world, had more wisdom to be knowing these things than those who were quick with the ways of life in their youth.

"Let him have a care of her," Shaughnessy had muttered into Kirwan's ear as they stood outside the crowd watching them both walking up the cliff road, "let him have a care of her, I'm sayin'. 'Tis not a drop of food put out in the black of the night would pacify Them always—it is not."

He had shaken the greasy grey hair about his shoulders;

with the back of his hand he had brushed away the gathering drops of thin water in his red eyes and nodding and muttering to himself, he had slouched away up the street.

The two most concerned of them all had said no word to each other the whole way up the cliff road. There were a few who had not been down to the church that were standing at their doors to see them go by. Those who had a wish of good luck to offer them muttered it so softly that none heard it but themselves.

To Mary it had seemed in a silence they had gone by, a silence of shame as her new-found conscience interpreted it. Yet there was then no shame in her heart. Perhaps she had clung a little closer to Fennel's arm. Perhaps she had even felt a little glad of him in the solidity of his strength beside her. Mostly she was still in a dazed wonder of life, performing every act of that morning with an automatic precision scarcely realising any significance in all she said and did.

When Fennel had closed the door behind her and they were alone, he went down on his knees beside the table, dragging her with him, in the first conscious sense of wonder she had felt that day.

"I thank the Almighty God," he had said and then he had put an arm about her and when she looked up he had kissed her for the second time in his life, still wondering a woman's lips could be so cold, yet with a triumphant pride of her in his heart now that she was his own.

Two years had gone by them since that day, and if there was no change in the life of Ardnashiela, there was a new world in the difference of life for these two. Fennel had taken another cottage on the upper road above the cliff, secluded from and independent of the rest of the village, with a patch of ground and room in it for them to be

growing their potatoes. Mary's child had been born, when, according to his promise, Fennel spoke no word to her again of what she had told him.

Gradually but utterly the whole soul's prospect of Mary's being was turned to a vision of the sweet gentleness of life. Long before the birth of her child that vision had come to her; faintly at first with a weary man returning to the door, the salt of the sea on his face and listless hands, too tired to do anything but wait until there was food ready for his eating. It grew to clearness with the sound of a voice that never knew anger, with eyes that followed her about the room, taking with a ceaseless gratitude all that she gave them, never feeding upon her and reverent always. Clearer still it grew with the peace that fell about her days and the simple work there was, mending his nets and minding the house until it became the rounded compass of her heart's quiet content.

So also in those months her conscience, soothed by time and lulled by circumstance, had gradually withdrawn into the silent retreat of her soul. Almost immediately after her marriage, the blind man had gone from the farm, departing upon his wanderings without apparent cause of reason, drift-wood, caught and then released upon the current. It was not long before some other wanderer from the weariness of those desolate roads took his place.

He had been the visible substance, the flesh and blood of Mary's conscience. So long as she saw him there by the fireside in the farm kitchen, her imagination found it possible to believe that without his sight he had known what had happened that night of the threshing feast, and, with Father Costello's departure coinciding with her own, had come at some shadow of the truth.

The day when she had gone down to help her father at the farm and had learnt how that morning at sunrise he

had shouldered his bundle and they had heard his stick tapping down the road, she felt as though a narrow path had been cleared for her. There was still that fear he might have spoken before he went. She had looked for signs of it in her mother, but there were none. Mary's sickness had called her to action and more speech than was her wont; but now that was passed, she had become the same silent woman once more. Returning to her retreat in the corner by the fire, she had continued plaiting her rushes, the voiceless spectator of that same slow process of life, forcing its gradual inroads by the low line of shore and working night and day beneath the high battlements of the cliffs.

Only one thought had remained, rising and falling, rising and falling, to distress the tranquillity of her mind. Fennel's belief in the faeries that had taken her away had withstood suspicion when she had just told him of her conviction about her child. Was it strong and simple enough in him to withstand the actual fact which, after some little time, she had known was to come to pass?

Father Costello had not returned. Another curate had taken his place. However they got their information in the village, she had not questioned, but she heard it said he had gone abroad. If she had had any regret for that, the growing affection and sense of responsibility in her heart for Fennel soon wore it away. Nothing it seemed had been left them but the test of his faith when her child was born.

She knew its father. Nothing could uproot her knowledge there. Already she was feeling the passion she had known deflected into an absorbing love for it. Never could she or would she deceive her husband into the thought that it was his own. A faerie child it might be if he believed it so, a creature of shadows and mist out of the silences and darkness of those hills, but to her always the living

voice of the eternity of that little while, when love had leaped in its scorching fire about her and she had been lifted in body and soul into the resistless pulse of life.

This was the test of faith she had waited for, expecting always as it drew nearer to her hour, his doubt would rise and break the pledge of silence he had given.

He had said nothing. A doctor had come over from Doonvarna and left her with her child. It was a boy.

With questioning eyes, she had watched Fennel's face when first he saw it lying against her breast. A little more than eight months it had been since their marriage. He had stood a while by the side of the bed, regarding her tenderly. Then at last he had sat down.

"Shall I tell ye something?" he had said.

Now was it coming? How could his faith believe! She had known it must prove more than the human heart of any man could endure. But it was not his child! His faith must hold or the truth must break it.

"What d'ye want to be sayin'?" she had asked.

He had heard all the quietness in her voice. She only had heard all else there was.

"'Twas the way I thought," he had said, "when I heard the cry ye had with the pain that was on ye—I thought 'twas Themselves had come for ye that time and 'twas gone from me for ever ye'd be then."

She had looked up, higher it had seemed than it was ever possible she could have looked again, and when he leant over her to kiss her lips they were blood warm as she had taken him close with her child into her naked arms.

From that day onwards, the very fullness of peace and contentment had come to her. With the exacting care of her child for the next few months, it had been impossible for her to give any help to her father at the farm. Hating

him always and much as he hated the thing he feared, this had been the last disturbing presence to be removed from her life.

As the slow months of her motherhood had slipped by, seeing nothing of her family, hearing no voice about her but that in an eager consideration of all she wished, Mary Kirwan had come to think very differently of the ground where that Mary Fennel would lie buried.

Beneath the accumulation of time and that dense shield of their belief, her secret was overgrown—hidden sometimes almost from herself. Falling away into the softening mist of the past, with no word of the priest ever to disturb or call it from its resting place, there were moments when she played with the thought it was the faeries indeed that had taken her that night. Dandling her baby on her knee or rocking it at her breast, she would often when she was alone sing to it a song she had once heard from one of those travelling men who had come to the farm when she was a child.

“Knock at the door of a white thorn tree
Lift up the latch and cry
‘Are you there—are you there? My love is gone.
Have you heard her feet go by?’”

Only it was—his feet—as she sang it and to some minor tune she had heard from a fiddler perhaps at the dancing in Kirwan’s kitchen.

In this manner with the care of her baby and the minding of the fisherman’s house, time spun itself out to the length of two years. Memory became no longer a pain to her, but some distant vision, wrapped in a haze of light that hid all the poignant meaning it had had. On the hot summer days, when Fennel was out on the water, she could and

often did, carry her charge round by the headland path to that very ledge of rock where she had stood with Father Costello. Sitting there, she would place it on her knee so that the round wonder of its eyes were staring back into hers and without a wrench of any pain at her heart, would sing:

“Knock at the door of a white thorn tree
Lift up the latch and cry
‘Are you there—are you there? My love is gone.
Have you heard her feet go by?’”

When her baby was weaned and there was time again to be spared from the house, she went back with reluctance, when sometimes her help was needed on the farm.

It was one morning, just two years after her marriage, that she went down to make the butter. There was none, James Kirwan admitted in a moment of praise, who could work the churn like herself. A fiddler's tune was drawing itself out in her breath as she walked along the strand in the bright, sharp light of that autumn morning. She was another woman now and knew it, and the knowledge was a gladness in her.

Entering the farm by a door on the field side of one of the sheds, she passed through the cow stalls, where first she had met the fisherman. It was without conscious thought of recalling it that the tune swelled to the round fullness of her voice, for she passed on without pausing through the other sheds onto the cobbled path before the house.

Now she was facing the iron gateway with its rusty hinge that opened onto the road. There she stopped. A sound first had held her—an even tapping, tapping, tap-

ping, like the labour of a wood-pecker in the silence of some forest place.

She looked through the gateway to the turning of the road and waited with her heart unaccountably still to learn its meaning. It was but a few moments and she knew.

After the two years of his wandering, the blind man, sensing his way with the touch of his stick and the sliding motion of his feet, had come back for a roof to his head and the grace of God they could be giving him.

II

IT was in the month of September that sprats and mackerel came in their shoals into Ardnashiela Bay. A net that was not mended then, a boat that was not ready for the water, lost the best of the year's fishing. No little of the secret of Fennel's success as a fisherman lay in the fact that his tackle was always clean, his boat always seaworthy.

Early those mornings of that autumn month, he was out about the headlands every day with the oldest of his men in whose family for generations had been vested that singular quality of sight, like the water-diviner's power. From the high altitude of the cliffs these men can see the approaching shoals where to the ungifted eye never a shadow stains the water's blue.

A week after the blind man's return to the farm, Fennel was sitting with Shawn Troy on the close grass at the cliff's edge beyond the third headland. All signs of the weather and the wind's direction pointed to the incoming of the fish. Five or six miles out, clusters of gulls had been cruising on the pearly surface of the water since daybreak. In the still air, when the note of a bee was a clarion over the heather, their cries came lingering, sometimes lifting, with faint shrilling sounds the breath of a breeze had carried swifter than the rest.

Below them, close at the rock's edge, the boat lay waiting for the first trumpet cry of command to put out with the nets. Two days already they had spent, waiting in vain, returning to the boat cove as evening fell. The men were lounging, stretched out in the sun across the seats. Some

were smoking their pipes; others chewing their tobacco, spitting the brown juice out into the green water and idly watching it trail away into the clear deep, emerald shadow of the boat. There was little talk between them. When they did speak, their voices rose in a soft murmur, the human organ note no other sound in nature can convey.

The two men on the cliff's edge sat with their chins upon their tilted knees, head, body, hands and limbs cut in sharp silhouettes of graven stillness. Only their eyes roamed, never resting, north, south and west. For more than an hour they had not spoken. Gods of a pagan world they might have been brooding over and determining the fates of those who waited on the sea below in human submission for the empyrean voice of destiny.

It was nine o'clock in the morning. They had been there since six. Shawn felt in his pocket and produced a piece of bread and cheese rolled in a red handkerchief. After a moment Fennel followed his example. Their eyes never left the sea. They munched their food in silence. Destroying that graven stillness, their jaws were rolling together. With the tranquillity remaining about them they suggested now two animals, scarce men, at their food time.

Shawn's voice broke the surrounding quiet and made them human.

"'Twould be a good thing," said he, "in the course of a piece, me bringing that boy ye have out here round the head to be sittin' with me. 'Tis young eyes can see the fish as well as the old when they'd have a sight is me own to be teachin' em.'"

Fennel finished his crust of bread before he answered.

"Maybe he's not for the fishin'," he said.

There was no inflection needed in his words to convey their disappointment. The mere statement upheld it. For the first moment in a long hour, Shawn's eyes left the sea,

snatching a glance at Fennel's face and returning immediately to their watching.

"Shure what's he for then?"

"'Tis the farming maybe. Herself goes down there often these days. She takes him with her. Isn't it a surer thing to be farming the land, has the crops risin' from it to the man would be sowin' em? Shure God knows what is it brings the fish into the Bay or keeps them driftin' out in the wastes of the water."

Shawn spat on the ground between his tilted knees.

"And he with a boat and nets and all when he's grown!"

There was no reply from Fennel.

"Shure I'd make a son of me own what I'd have him be."

Shawn continued and they fell to silence again.

"A son of me own—!" Those words lingered. They hung in the air, repeating themselves again and again, like a thread running backwards and forwards through a thought that for some time had found the substance of being in Fennel's mind.

Might it not after all be his child? It had been born a week or two sooner than they expected. But he had heard of children being born in seven months. Some, a few indeed, in less, but sure, they all knew what that meant.

Every one there in the village believed it was his own. Without word or question, Father Roche had christened it. It was those asking him, as they often did down on the sea-wall, about his child, who had set the seed of that thought to grow in a ready soil.

Never since those fifteen months it had been born, had they spoken of it as a faerie child, nor for that matter, as his, but hers only.

"Look at him now," she'd say in the pride she had of him and often, when he was not close, it was—my baby—she'd

be calling it. But what was that to say one way or another whose it was?

She had said she was going to have a child, that time he brought her back from Them out of the hills, but how the Hell could she be knowing that in herself? There was no woman could know such a thing in the time there must be for a child to be born!

Why shouldn't it be his? That very night of their marrying, cold though she was compared with the tenderness that had come to her in those two years, he had had her in his arms. What the deuce did Shaughnessy know about Themselves, more than any other man in those parts? And if 'twas Their child it was, wasn't it likely fetchin' it away for Themselves They'd be? He did not doubt Their existence, or had he lost conviction of the presence of that unseen world, but now that the lonesomeness of his life had fallen from him, it was more sure of himself he was. His fishing had been successful all that time. He was beginning to believe They could not touch him now. And all those months, hearing her singing to that thing in her arms, knowing in himself his own manhood and envious sometimes of the love she gave it, he had come first to entertain the wish that it was his own and at last to give admittance to the thought.

It was true enough he would have wished the boy to be a fisherman, taking the nets he had and putting out his boat when he was come to be a man. But latterly she had begun again going down to the farm and now for the last week had gone each day. That was the thought he had had, that she wished her son to live the life she had known and, in the brooding of his mind, had found the edge of a shadow falling over the peace and contentment that had come about his days. Being a man of no words for the vague sensations of his thoughts, he had said nothing.

Each day of that week, Mary had gone down to the farm. They were busy, she said, and in a toil of work after the threshing. Perhaps they were. He had let her go, pursuing no thought that might have come to him. And now this old man beside him had put words to it all which, once spoken in the stillness of that air, lingered on the silence about them and would not be dumb.

All there was that could outcry them happened then a moment later. Stiffening in all his body and then, as though a powerful hand had lifted him, Shawn Troy sprang to his feet. In his excitement, with his native tongue he cried out in Gaelic that the fish were drifting into the rocks. Sprats they were. He could see that from where he was, though never a shadow seemed to have fallen upon the water. The mackerel were after them. They were bearing into the fourth headland. Seizing his hat in his hand for a signal to direct them, he yelled out to the boat below to make ready.

Every thought he had had was swept in the sudden gust of action out of Fennel's mind. At the first glimpse of that rigidity that had set about the body of his companion, he had stood to his feet. Now he was climbing down the face of the cliffs to the water's edge. Oars were rattling in the boat below as they fitted them into the rowlocks. A fever of action was a leaping fire in every vein. Their eyes glittered with it. Their voices were high-pitched. There was a commotion in the boat like a lot of children let out of school. They trampled upon each other to reach their seats; they cursed and swore and every moment seemed as though they would be fighting amongst themselves.

Only the presence of Fennel, when he reached the boat, steadied them. At last with the noise only of the sweeps, they put away from the rocks and with short strokes, leaving the marks as it were of the countless feet of a centipede

upon the water, they sped across the glass of the sea to the fourth head.

From the cliffs above, with waving arm and the screeching cries of his voice, growing more and more hoarse as he yelled one swift direction upon another, Shawn Troy guided them to their destination. In those adventures, there is no time to be lost. The shoals move swiftly. With one last stentorian effort of his voice, that broke as he made it with a whistle in his throat, he screamed to them to begin paying out the net.

From one point of the rocks where a man was landed clinging to the rock the boat edged round in a sweeping circle from the shore. Like coils of spawn the net was baled out into the sea, sinking below the green water with only the floating corks to mark its course. And then, when the other end was landed, the slow hauling began.

Closer and closer to the rocks, the circle of corks narrowed as the net was drawn in and at last, as the boat closed round to lift the catch, the emerald water was a fume of liquid silver boiling in a cauldron with the leaping fish.

An hour was passed before the haul was ladled into the boat, a shine of simmering silver, full to the seats, that cooled and cooled from the fret in that cauldron, till it was lapping only with the sway of the boat as the men waded knee-deep in its glittering mass.

Two men were all she could carry with the weight of that load. The water was up to the gunwales as they sat to their oars, their legs submerged in silver and the sway of that molten metal washing against their bodies as they rowed.

The lightest men had been chosen for the boat, that they might take the utmost of the catch. Even then a cloud of shimmering bodies lay floating on the water for the screech-

ing gulls to eat. Fennel went with the rest of the men back to Ardnashiela by the headland patch. If they walked swiftly, there was no need. With that burden in her, the boat would be long behind them. But they were laughing and easy in their minds now that their work was over. It was the biggest haul they had had that year.

News by that time was in the village that Fennel's boat had landed a catch of sprats. A donkey butt was already waiting on the slip of sand in the boat cove to hawk the fish from one outlying farm to another even as far as the hills and into Doonvarna itself. Idlers were gathered in groups on the sea-wall. Women and children were ready with plates and baskets for their purchase fresh out of the boat. And there, sitting alone on the rocks, with her baby on her knee, was Mary, waiting to see her man's boat come in.

There were none eager to be talking with her, even in those days. It was fear perhaps, or a strangeness they had. Never did she pass through the street but what heads were turned to look at her. It would only be when she was grown to be an old woman that they would have courage to ask her what memory she had of those days when she was taken in the hills.

Fennel himself had never spoken of it again and seeing her there, sitting alone, his thought came swiftly to realise her isolation. Speeding his steps, he went on ahead of the men and came with sure foothold across the rocks to her side.

"Is it a big haul?" she asked.

He said it was.

"There was word came out to the farm."

He nodded.

She nodded down at her baby and with her eyes directed Fennel's eyes to look at it.

"I had a thought," said she, "to bring him down to see his first catch come in."

Fennel felt a quick tightening upon his heart. So sudden was it, it might have been a hand—her hand—that for an instant held it and then let the blood flow free. His eyes stayed a moment on the baby's face and then lifted, resting on her own.

"His first catch—" he repeated.

"Maybe it won't be his last," said she.

He tried to believe it all at once. Was life like that? So sudden a coincidence after his talk with Shawn Troy on the cliffs and the shadow of his thoughts that had followed swift upon their words? Had it so much warmth of joy in it as this? Since she had come to him, it had seemed to be so. The last shadow was gone now. It would not be his last catch! It was a fisherman she wanted him to be. Surely 'twas that way she meant it. He asked her—was it that?

"'Tis not for the land ye want him so?" said he.

Almost with vehemence she shook her head.

"I've known one these two years is fishin' on the sea," she replied, "and it's sooner with that one I'd leave him than anny would be workin' on the land."

She lifted her baby up in her hands and with a laugh at his awkwardness and timidity, she laid him in Fennel's arms. It was the first time he had held him. He heard them laughing away there on the sea wall. They could laugh! Shure, what the Hell did they know of the things he knew then!

Why was it they didn't go on laughing? What was stopping them? He was ready to stand there, with his head thrown back—if it was safe with that creature he was holding—and laugh with them and at them and above the

voices of every single one of them with the loud shout of the joy in his heart.

Why didn't they go on with their laughter? What had happened? There was a boy had run down the cliff road from the path round the headlands. They were all gathered about him like gulls over the netted sprats. What was he saying? What was the matter?

He put the child back in Mary's arms. An instinct of uncertainty drew him over to the sea-wall. They told him then, one voice breaking in upon another. The boy led them. He had seen. The substance of the story came from him.

In a sway from the rowing of the men, the boat had shipped water. In a moment she had settled down with the sea pouring over the gunwales. She had capsized. The catch was lost and one of the men—one of the men who could not swim—

"Yirra, say it in the name of God!" shouted Fennel.

"He's drowned," said the boy, "'tis under the water he is and his hat floatin' out there beyond the second head of the cliffs."

III

THE visible semblance of Mary's conscience had taken flesh and blood again with the return of the blind man. Rather than driving her from it, fear drew her each day to the farm. She could not stay away. The revival of apprehension in her had come with an added terror to disturb her peace. She had the inarticulate sensation that all that had happened that night in the hills would not die out of her life as in those days of contentment it had seemed to have done, but must live on, always lingering with her—never at rest.

Something there was had given it a deathlessness of being. Nothing could destroy it. She felt it in the eyes that watched her wherever she went. In her acceptance of their beliefs she had given it life. As long as she lived there in Ardnashiela, she would be to them one of those whom the faeries had led astray. They could never forget that and, so long as it was remembered by them, there would remain in vivid consciousness, her memory of that night in the Gap of Doon.

She would have forgotten it now if she could. But would they ever allow her to do that? Knowing the soft sweetness there could be in life, she longed sometimes that they might leave Ardnashiela and never look upon it again.

Yet these were but indefinite ideas compared with the actual presence of the blind man in the farm kitchen, always sitting there at the bellows wheel, an ever-present voice of her conscience, if indeed he had knowledge and should choose to speak. These daily visits of hers now to the farm

were set with one fixed determination. Once and for all time she must discover what he knew of that which had happened after the threshing feast. There was no suspicion in her now that he had spoken to her mother. If any, it was her father she most feared. It was a wide berth always he gave her. In short and abrupt sentences he answered her only when she spoke her words to him. Sometimes he did not answer at all when by his eyes, furtively kept from her, she knew he had heard what she said.

Did he know? Had the blind man whispered the secret to him? Anxious as he had been for help on the day of his settlement with Fennel, he seemed none too glad of her presence there now in the house. She had sought to propitiate him by the help she offered. Her fear increased when, after the disaster to Fennel's boat, he hired the labour of a hand out of the village. It was not only to milk the cows this girl had come. Any of those little things Mary might have done, she was set with her hands to do. It was a protest—a notice—a warning. He did not want her to be coming near the place at all. Did he know? Had the blind man whispered his secret to him?

Fear still drove her there to learn the worst, whatever it might be. For many days after the blind man's return, no opportunity arose to speak with him alone. Always her mother was there, silent, a shadow falling obliquely across the light she sought.

It was not until five days after the catch was lost and Michael Kelleher, brother of the smith, was drowned, that her moment came. The blind man was alone in the kitchen, rousing the fire for the hour of tea. She sat down on the hearth by his side as he turned the bellows wheel, waiting for long moments while she summoned courage and cunning to begin, watching the milk white of those eyes and wondering how deep was the darkness that was in them.

"Is it the way ye can't see at all?" she asked presently—"and ye starin' at me now with the look of watchin' is in yeer eyes?"

"I was born dark—an' 'tis the darkness itself will always be on me. But isn't there a touch comes to those would be in the ends of their hands and can't they hear the sound of the wind the time it'd be turnin' to the softness of the rain? Shure, if 'twas the light I could see now, mightn't the ears be goin' deaf on me and what 'ud I be doin' to know what was happenin' about me then?"

"Can ye hear everything?"

"I can, of course."

"'Tis sweet music ye'd be hearin' then the time ye'd be playin' yeer fiddle in the night."

A faint smile spread about his lips with the pride that came to him when she said that. For there was none of her cunning he heard or wished to be hearing in it while the praise of her words was a sweet sound in his ears.

"Well, glory be," said he. "There's many a one I've played to for them to be singin' or dancin', has never said the like of that to me before."

Whether that were invitation or not for her to be flattering him still, it was readily she accepted it. This was the narrow way to his confidence and all the subtlety and charm of her sex she drew forth from herself to take it.

"Shure, I never heard a man had his sight," said she, "could play the way ye can with the strings."

He began telling her how he had learnt his fiddle, sitting by roadsides in the hills and down the valleys and listening to the tunes would be always in the air for those were dark from the hour of their birth. For a time, while his pride was riding him with speech, she let him go on with his stories of the hours he had played at this dance or that at the fairs, without

stopping to put the resin on his bow or wasting his hand for a drink.

"'Twas a long hour ye played that night of the threshing feast," she interrupted him at last, "and shure, when 'twas all gone they were, didn't ye start again with that tune himself was askin' ye for?"

"Ah—that's a grand one," said he, and there was a lingering in his voice with the memory of it, so that she knew his heart was gone back to the night in the hills when it had come with the wind in the air to his ears.

"That's a tune would be takin' ye away, the time ye'd hear it played well with the soft rise and the fall of it."

"Does it take ye away as ye play?" she asked.

He nodded his head.

"Shure it didn't take ye away that night."

"Why so?"

"Weren't ye askin' for the feet to be dancin' to it—ye sittin' on the table there and knockin' the tap of yeer heels?"

"Did I ask that?"

She held a sudden breath.

"Ye did of course."

"Yirra, who was there to be dancin'—and they all gone?"

She laughed aloud.

"Wasn't I dancin' meself!" she said and, understanding nothing of it, he heard the high rise in her voice.

"Ye were?"

"I was indeed. Maybe 'twas the tune itself took me away, the time I fell down in a weakness on the floor. Shure, glory be, ye haven't forgotten that, have ye, with yeerself and the priest was there and ye pattin' me hand and himself runnin' for the cold water to be throwin' over me face!"

"'Tis not that I've forgotten," said the blind man, "but meself askin' for the noise of the feet or the sound of any dancin' I'd be hearin' at all. Well—isn't that a strange thing

now, the way ye'd be doin' and sayin' things and there be no knowing in yeerself what ye'd be sayin' or doin' at all."

He fell into a muse of thought, as though his life were full of those things he had done and said if in his recollection he could only recapture them. It was nodding his head he was then and with sharp sounds in his breath as thoughts knocked at the door of his memory and, when he opened it, ran away.

IV

THERE was thunder hanging low about the hills of Doon that evening when Mary went home. Her heart laughed at it. Scarcely a civil word had her father spoken to her that day. The thought of it came lightly to her now. She hated him in her heart no less than she had ever done. Doubtless he hated her too. But he knew nothing and could never know. Fear was gone from her hatred. She felt an exultant satisfaction in it that could easily have turned to laughter with every other thought she had.

Let him believe the faeries had taken her—shure, let him believe! What harm could that do to her or the sweet tenderness there was in life for her now?

As she went up the street to the back road where their cottage was, she passed Maggie, the sister of that Kelleher who had been drowned. The body had been recovered from the water. They had waked him two days before. The new curate had buried him in that grave-yard by the upper road. She had not gone. Fennel had persuaded her it would only be a fret to herself if she went. She was willing to obey. None sought her company now and surely they did not want it then in the sorrow that was on them. Maybe he had realised that too. They never spoke of it. Maybe that was why he had dissuaded her.

Maggie was approaching her on the same side of the street. At the first sight of Mary and for no apparent purpose, she crossed out of the way of their meeting. The deliberateness of the action caught her in surprise. She realised it had been done with intent. In that moment

she had not grasped what the intention was. Some quick determination in her urged her to test its meaning. She gave her some words of salutation across the street. Maggie kept her eyes away and hurried by.

A stupor of confusion then fell over Mary's thoughts as she walked home. In her heart she knew what it meant. It was in her mind only she refused to accept its meaning. Was that what her father was thinking too? Was that why he avoided her at every opportunity? Were they such fools as to believe that she could bring them misfortune? Did they think it was because of her that Kelleher, the fisherman, had been drowned? This was a new thought to take the place of that fear of her conscience. Her eyes were staring at it as she walked. They were still staring at it as she entered the door. All that evening, sitting by the fire they fixed themselves upon that dark veil of significance drawn close across the clear meaning it concealed.

For a long while Fennel was aware of her mood before he spoke. Then, as often was his habit when they talked together, he leant forward across the fire, stretching out for her hand. She gave it and looked up.

"What's on ye?" he asked, gently.

She shook her head.

"There's something is on ye," he persisted.

She tried to shake her head again. The steady look in his eyes broke down her wish for silence. Surely he did not believe what they believed! Was this her penance, her punishment? Was she to be isolated even from him?

The desire to know and to know all rushed upon her then. It was things hidden she feared.

"Why was it Kelleher was drowned?" she asked.

It was the suddenness of her question that confused him. The steadiness fell from his eyes. He turned then

to look in the fire. He looked anywhere for that moment but at her. Then with a new firmness his eyes returned.

"'Twas rowin' careless they were," said he, "and the boat full as it could hold with the catch. Shure, 'twas no more than a twist or turn of them would do it and once the water was in with that weight of fish there was, who could save her? Didn't Cronin say himself 'twas pullin' careless they were and they pressin' on to be gettin' into the cove?"

She held him straightly with her look.

"Is that what ye believe yeerself?" she asked.

"It is."

"Why did Maggie Kelleher cross the street a while since the time I was comin' home and she with no tongue in her head or a look for me would be in her eyes when I'd be givin' a good-evenin' to her?"

He knew well why that was. There was talk at the wake and the burying, too, they had not been able to keep away from his ears. But what was the good of his telling her and fretting her with the words of it? Wasn't it for that reason, knowing what they were saying, he had kept her away and what was the sense in telling her now when it was past?

He made no answer and suddenly she went down on her knees on the floor at his side, catching at his arms and searching his face.

"Tell me!" she whispered. "Can't I see ye know why a thing like that would be in her mind to be doin' it to me? What is it? Shure, I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid!"

They did not notice how it was herself who first spoke of fear. He put an arm on her shoulder and held her closely to him.

"Shure, 'tis only a lot of talk they have amongst themselves. Yirra, what's talk! There's no hurt in it."

"Well—what is their talk? What is it they're sayin'?"

She dragged it from him, all he had heard in the street and on the sea-wall, at the wake and when they were burying the body of Michael Kelleher up there in the grave-yard. It was she, taken those two years ago by Themselves in the hills they were remembering and it was that way misfortune had come to the fisherman, the time she was waiting there with her baby in her arms by the cove.

"Shure, what one would be comin' home safe?" they had asked each other, "with the like of herself waitin' there for them? Wasn't it a wonder himself had been kept from harm these two years with her waitin' always by the fire?"

With the fast holding of her hands, Mary clung to him.

"Is it the way ye believe that yeerself!" she cried to him. "Wisha, God help us—isn't it a sweet time the days have been with our two selves sittin' here and surely to God 'tis no harm but the end of yeer lonesomeness I've brought ye."

"'Tis a sweet time it's been," he comforted her, "and it's not meself could be thinkin' there's any harm comin' with ye at all. Wasn't it careless they were with the sweeps and wouldn't that happen to anny man if 'twas the divvle itself was waitin' for him?"

He held her so closely that she clung to him no more but lay there with little breaths now of her weeping and most of her fear driven away. So long as he did not believe, that was all she cared. Let her father and all of them think what they liked! She need never go to the farm again. Never any more need she be seen in the street. But, oh, to be taken far away from it all! There was completeness of life she needed, with her child and in the strength of those arms that were holding her.

With the impulse of that, she was suddenly whispering in his ears to take her away.

"Haven't ye money is put by?" she pleaded with him, "and couldn't we go to America? Isn't there many have gone there to be gettin' away from the starvin' waste of this land? Take me away!" she begged of him,. "Ah, shure, take me away! Isn't it hatin' this place I am and won't there be new life comin' to us over there?"

He set her away from him, so that she was sitting down on the floor at his side, watching him, waiting for his answer, content so long as she could see his thought of it to let him be staring in a silence at the fire.

Presently he stood up. With a sharp eagerness her eyes followed him as he went to the bed. From beneath it, where well she knew it was, he pulled out the same wooden box that was lying on the table that night when the priest had helped him with his counting. In a questioning silence, she joined him as he laid it on the table.

"Are we goin'?" she whispered. "Is it really goin' away from here we are?"

"What's the fear is on ye?" he asked her gently.

She shivered and opened the lid of the box.

"Let ye begin countin' to see is there enough," said she, and with her hands and her reckoning she helped, laying out the little heaps of measured pounds till they were covering the table. Once he stopped in his calculations.

"D'ye know when I did this last?" said he.

She shook her head and when he told her, it was some unaccountable fear she had, with no room for regret or even a sadness in her memory.

"Go on countin'!" she whispered, "ye'll forget how much it is. There's twenty-four is here. Go on."

He had drawn upon his savings for their marriage. Now and again he had given her money to buy things for herself. There had been the doctor from Doonvarna. Thirty-eight pounds was all that remained. She looked up at him,

eagerly waiting, feeling out with her hand to touch his arm. Her lips were parted. Life was a pause with her, even in her breathing.

"We could go," he said presently, "and bi the time I'd sold me boat and the nets I have, there'd be a matter of twenty or thirty pounds maybe for ourselves and we over there. But shure, what would I be doin' in a strange place, with no work to me hands?"

Weren't there fishermen in every land she asked him, and couldn't he be turning his hand to that which suited him best?

He led her with him back to the fire, seating himself and holding both her hands so that he could be looking at her.

"Is it feared ye are of the things they'd be sayin' of ye?"

"It is," said she.

"Shure, words can't harm ye."

She knew only one thing to say, that he should take her away from that place and it was down on her knees she said it, pleading with the softness of her voice and tears gathering in pools in her eyes. For it was not only the people in Ardnashiela she felt were against her. What did she really care for the disregard of Maggie Kelleher or the silence of her father and the furtive look now always in his eyes when he met her own? She need go no more into the village. Her father had his paid hand to be milking the cows and doing the work that she had done. There was no need for her ever to go to the farm again.

It was not so much the people she feared, as this sense that her life itself was a lie which something, stronger than her motive to tell it, was binding her to with fetters clamped about her soul.

In those two years she had touched the hem of the veil of peace. Forever this seemed to cast her from it now. Never among all those about her would she be able to

pass beyond the lie that guarded her and find that full vision of contentment her heart had glimpsed and now so dearly longed for.

Once away from there, away from them all, the sight of those hills of Doon, the desolate road through the bog-land, it even seemed to her she could tell him all and once told, her life could begin again.

She caught his hand in her hands, looking up and pleading piteously with her eyes.

"Ye're the only one," she murmured, "would believe I was not bringin' harm to them and how can there be anny joy at all for me or the both of us with them thinkin' there's nothing but misfortune I'd be havin' in me face?"

How could he refuse? Even if it meant the beginning of his life all over again, how could he refuse her? Was there anything he knew of in life he would not give her if he could? There was nothing.

"We'll go away," he said quietly, "as soon as the time of the fishin' is over this year and I've got all I can out of me boat—we'll go away. Shure, God help us, haven't I pair of hands and would I break the world for ye—I would indeed!"

She cried out aloud as she came into his arms.

V

FEAR is contagion, a slow and subtle fever reaching its climacteric by imperceptible degrees. It is no sudden disorder of the mind, but lingers and germinates in the blood, feeding here and there upon the little events in the lives of those who suffer from it.

For those two years since Mary Kirwan's disappearance, the disease had been planted in the minds of all those in Ardnashiela and in none so virulently as in James Kirwan. There was only Fennel, the fisherman, it had not infected. Love becomes immune from fear. He believed no less that They had taken her that night. His faith in that unseen world was not diminished. A greater faith had set it aside. No more had happened to him than that. She had become to him his highest and closest touch with life.

This is the determination of all; how near and at what point of spiritual altitude they find their contact. In the Christ story, the point of altitude is such that love conquers death, for love is the only emotion, translated into various qualities of selflessness, which lifts the contact with life transcendently above the laws of nature.

There was no vestige of that emotion in the whole composition of James Kirwan. His touch with life was only where nature laid her hands upon him. She had laid her hands upon him and deeply smitten him with that fever of fear since the night of Mary's disappearance.

Secretly in his heart, he wished often that Fennel had never brought her back. Lacking the courage to tell her openly that he did not want her help on the farm, yet using

it with no great gratitude when she gave it, he had done his best to show her she was no longer welcome in her home.

To his ears had come easily the stories of all those little things that had happened in the village during those two years, for which Mary alone was held responsible. She had stopped in the street and spoken to Mrs. Cotter's youngest girl as she was passing by. The next day the child was sick and brought to its bed for two weeks. And what was that but herself putting her eyes on her? God alone knew what she said for the child was in a fever and could not remember a word of it.

It had rained the year before when the corn was being cut and Mary was there in the fields, sheaf-binding. There had been no sign of rain the previous evening. The wind had been set in a dry quarter for three days before and then in the midst of cutting the barley, it had come down, sheeting with solid water. A good part of the crop had been nearly ruined. Would that have happened at all if she had not been there in the fields to be bringing it?

There was no virtue of loyalty in him. Much that he heard when he was playing cards at Creasy's licensed house was said in his presence because he made no concealment of his suspicions.

"Didn't I always know," said he sometimes at his own fireside, "there was a queer drop was in her? Hadn't she the look of it always in her eyes? Shure I knew well that black dog was one of Themselfs with her. Didn't she have it sleepin' with her in the room at nights? Maybe 'twas in her own bed she had it. And well I knew that time I had it killed in the barley field, 'twas not the last bit of harm she'd be bringin' me."

He thought these things to himself, by day and night sometimes, when his sleep was not coming to him. Through

those two years the fever accumulated with its poison in his blood. And then came the disaster to Fennel's boat and that man—God help him!—drowned in a still sea, the way it was not the rough of the waters had him at all, but herself waiting there on the rocks had brought him the mischance of his death.

He was not the only one who thought that, but in him it was vehement, rising above the pitch of the hatred in his fear to a lurking desire for vengeance. What difference was there between one who did murder and another who brought with her the misfortune of death? He asked himself that question. He asked it by his own fireside when his wife was not there and the blind man, turning the bellows wheel, seemed no more than an animal to whom he might speak his thoughts aloud.

"If it isn't murder to be bringin' death to a man," he exclaimed with no context to the thought he was voicing, "shure what is it in the name of God?"

The blind man made no answer. In the silence that was expected of him, he continued turning the bellows wheel, till the fire was throwing its sparks into the black mouth of the chimney and there were red embers at the edge for him to be lighting his pipe.

No one heard the storm of thunder that night after Mary had been for her last time at the farm. In all Ardnashiela she was the only one lying awake, watching the sudden illuminations in the room as the lightning flared through their little window.

They were going away. The sweetness of life was holding out its hands, beckoning to her once again. They were going away from the sound of all those memories that had their voice in the winds and the breaking sea, from the sight of them too always remindful in the headlands of the cliffs and that long purple line of the hills of Doon.

Once, for a time, she had thought in the security of her growing contentment, that she could play with those memories—tender and gentle things that could never hurt her again. That which they brought her now was more terrible than pain. She was afraid.

With the looks she had seen in the eyes of every one, and now with what she had heard and all she could imagine was yet untold, her memories and everything that had happened to her were assuming the significance of some avenging and relentless power. From every side it seemed to be approaching and surrounding her. In the sound of the thunder that night, in those quick vindictive eyes of lightning that peered with their flashes into the room and seemed above all to be searching for the dread that was in her soul, she felt the advancing presence of it.

There was only one escape she could see. That lay open, a thread of narrow light piercing the darkness. They were going away. As soon as the season of the fishing was over, they were leaving that place forever. It was this which seemed to her of all the most uplifting proof of Fennel's love for her. Could any man have done more?

For well she knew what a wrench it would be to him to sell his boat and nets and begin life again in a new world. Yet he had not failed her. They were going away. In little more than a month, the fishing would be over. If the weather did not hold, it might be less.

His hand lay on the pillow beside his head as he slept. Through all the noise of the storm, he was breathing like a child. His faith had held with him and had not turned to fear. There was no suspicion of her in his heart as in the hearts of all those others. He could lie beside her there in the restful peace of sleep. Was it true that she brought misfortune to others? Was it misfortune she had brought to the priest? Might she yet bring it to him there beside her?

A sharp cry of dread forced its way between her lips. Then a fork of lightning splashed the room with a pallid yellow light. She saw the hand with its coarse weather-broken skin and the heavy knuckles lying on the pillow beside her.

It was no delicate thought she had, except that she would not wake him. Just an impulsive gratitude she felt. Gladly she could have hidden herself in his arms. As it was, she kissed his hand and a while later found her sleep.

The next morning, the hired girl at the farm came in from the dairy into the kitchen to inform Kirwan that all the milk of the evening before had soured in the pans. There was no milk was fresh, she told him, for him to be selling in the village that day and it might as well be given to the pigs for all the butter it would be making, so rank it was.

The farmer looked at his wife. She returned his glance with no meaning, no expectancy, no wonder in her eyes.

"D'ye hear that!" he shouted.

She nodded her head. She had heard.

"Wasn't herself here yesterday?" he asked.

"She was," replied the girl.

"Was she in the dairy at all?"

"She was—askin' couldn't she help skim the milk."

He strode to the door and took down his hat from its peg.

"Where are ye goin'?" asked Mrs. Kirwan imperturbably.

"Never mind where I'm goin'," he exclaimed and went out with his coat flying open in the wind.

With hasty steps in which there was a driven impulse rather than a desire for speed, he paced down the farm road, turning to the left on the Doonvarna road and hurrying on till he came to Shaughnessy's cabin.

He had to wake the old man up from his sleep and it was with no gentle hand he did it. Shaughnessy sat blinking his eyes, with the stupor of sleep hanging heavily on the pale

lids. Without pause or explanation for his coming, Kirwan began at once.

"Didn't ye tell me, the day she was married, 'twas not a sup of food would pacify Themselves always? Didn't ye tell me that?"

"I did."

"Then what will pacify Them now, for as long as she's about this place, 'tis destroyed I'll be with me farmin' and the work I'd be doin' on the land?"

He enumerated all the things that had happened in those two years, each one of which he found no difficulty with the ready imagination of his suspicions to be relating to Mary herself. The control of his emotions was out of balance. Fear was mastering him and riding his thoughts with the spurs of hatred.

He walked up and down that room with the stale stench of blood that was there in his nostrils, cursing the day she was born and calling down the mercy of God upon himself for begetting her.

"What can ye do for me now!" she shouted. "Wasn't it yeerself, with the charm ye had and I puttin' it on the sill of the door that night, had her brought back to us and amn't I wishin' every day since that time, 'twas throwin' it in the sea I was the time I was bringin' it home?"

For a long while, Shaughnessy sat rocking himself to and fro in his bed. As the farmer watched, the sharp twinkle of a cunning thought took a light to his eyes.

"Let ye be workin' it out in yeer mind," said he, "for there's divvle another beast I'll be lettin' ye have if 'tis not helpin' me through the trouble is on me now."

The old man made no motion that he had heard. Without his trade, there was no living for him in Ardnashiela. Five miles away was the nearest farm. He knew the soft bulk of his limbs would not be carrying him that distance to be

fetching his sheep. If Kirwan took to killing his own beasts as some of the men did in the isolated farms of that neighbourhood, it was into Doonvarna he would have to be going in his shame to the Union.

Yet there was no sign of fear he betrayed at the sound of Kirwan's threat. Just swaying himself, he sat there and it was a long time before he spoke.

"A beast's blood is no good," he said at last.

Kirwan watched and listened with his lips parted.

"'Tis not the blood of anny beast would pacify Them-selves. Haven't They left her the evil eye and 'tis there is the harm she's bringin'. A beast's blood is no good."

Below his breath, Kirwan heard his voice muttering as he asked was it blood or what charm was it at all would ever take away the evil eye from one once it was put upon them.

"If it was her own blood we could get," said Shaughnessy with an impassive voice.

There was one thing he knew as well as, if not better than, Kirwan. Not anything in spells or charms could remove the curse of the evil eye. Once They had put it upon man or woman, there was no contriving it away. Those in his knowledge that had had the stroke of it, it was never safe to be trusting oneself with them again.

He had no fear as Kirwan had, unless it were his fear of the farmer's threat. But it made no coward of him. He knew with shrewd intuitiveness the kind of man he dealt with. Cruelty in the butcher was a deep delight in his nature. When they saw him driving home his beast for the slaughter, they were close to the truth when they thought they saw a gleam of joy in Shaughnessy's eyes. Those expiring struggles of the wretched animal in his hands were moments to him when he felt the pleasant sense of life, the sense of power, the consciousness of his own virility.

Kirwan was far too afraid of death to kill like that in

cold blood and find an expression of the vigour of himself in killing. In terror only could he take life. It was in a clear conviction of mind Shaughnessy knew that. This was how he had killed the black dog in the barley field. In such a horror of fear only would he rid himself now of the curse that was upon them all. For what but misfortune to himself would Mary bring with the evil that was in her, if he failed with his charm and Kirwan carried out his threat?

She must be put away, as the black dog had been put away and that was not like killing a sheep. He knew well enough what murder was and there was no fear in him great enough for him ever to commit it. The meaningless glance of his eye lingered over Kirwan's face as he considered how the witless fear of that nature he knew so well could be driven to the blind deed of murder.

Her own blood! What might not happen? His imagination worked in him underground, never rising to the surface of clear vision. He could not foresee what would happen. But her own blood! How he did not know, but it seemed a step in the direction he sought. Her own blood! The sight of it perhaps. He felt none himself but knew there was fear in the sight of blood.

"If 'twas her own blood we could get," he repeated.

Kirwan knew there was a pallor over his face. Fear was already rising with his thoughts and the sight they brought him—fear in a thin stream, oozing through the feeble sluice-gates that secured his soul against the torrent and terror of life. He felt the sweat start out upon his lip.

"Well then yeerself can get it," he said quickly. "Isn't it handy ye are with a knife, the way ye could be drawin' the bad drop out of her and she not hurt at all?"

A smile of pity parted the placid curve of Shaughnessy's lips. More than ever like a woman he looked in that mo-

ment, a seared woman and old, smiling at the petulant folly of a little child.

"Ah shure, there's no good meself doin' it," said he. "Yirra, what harm have I had from her? Maybe Kelleher the smith, would do it for the misfortune she brought on himself. But 'tis your own blood she is and I wouldn't swear what way the charm would work if 'twas anny but yeerself did it."

"How will I get it?"

"Faith, isn't it easy enough to be slippin' a little bit of her skin with a knife?"

"Easy! Shure, glory be, isn't there himself there is always with her. I wouldn't dare be touchin' a hair of her head while he'd be in the place."

"Can't ye get her down to the farm?"

"I might."

"'Tis the only way to be riddin' yeerself of the bad drop is in her," said Shaughnessy, "and that's not so sure as what might be."

"What's that?" Kirwan wet his lips.

The old man squeezed the water out of his eyes and from his fingers flicked the drop of it on to the floor.

"Oh—there's no talkin' about the other," said he. "Let ye be doin' what I tell ye and maybe she'll never trouble ye again."

It was all against his will and with fear driving him that Kirwan enquired what other way he meant. He had a dread to be hearing it in an apprehension of what it was, yet the words came involuntarily from his lips.

"Maybe 'twould be easier," said he.

Fear clung to the little hopes he had.

Shaughnessy shook his head and, in the silence through which they looked at each other, all understanding passed. It was the sure way, that other way—the way he had rid him-

self of the curse of the black dog. The old man was quite right. There was no talking about the other. He had not talked about it that day he had taken the dog out into the barley field.

He shuddered with the terror there was in life.

VI

FOR the next few days in the fields or the yard or by the kitchen fire, Kirwan pondered over Shaughnessy's advice, contriving and scheming in his mind how it could be carried out. He feared the violence of Fennel and had that been all, would never have persisted. But the physical fear of violence was nothing in him to those apprehensions and forebodings which lurked in hidden thoughts and leapt upon him unawares. And when he had achieved the thing he sought to do, would it avail? Was there not only one way to rid himself forever of the curse she had brought upon his house? And that would be murder. He was amazed to find that that thought did not frighten him. Almost dispassionately he could regard it, telling himself a man would be a fool indeed to risk his neck, though God knew, anything was better than the terrors of a thing unseen. Still, so long as it was not close about him then, he could reason with himself. It was in those troubled contemplations, a fretting irritant to all his thoughts, that sometimes he spoke aloud and heard no sound of his voice.

"Ye couldn't do it," he muttered one evening. "It isn't in ye to be doin' it."

"Be doin' what?" asked Mrs. Kirwan, searching his face.

He started to the consciousness of what he must have said, and, mumbling an evasive answer, had gone out into the fields where the night was falling, walking up and down through the stubble, mistrusting his own tongue.

When Mary had not come down to the farm for three days, he grew easier in his thoughts. Fear turned to pro-

crastination. If only she would keep away no harm might come of her. It was the very sound of that word—blood—that frightened him. By the time a week had passed and she had made no appearance, his fears, easily roused and easily soothed, had fallen from the sharp stress of fever. Only when he remembered the hatred she had flung at him that night when he had spoken to her of Fennel, did he doubt his wisdom of postponement. He had laughed and made nothing of it then, but for all the offers of her help about the place, he knew well how hatred like that, as she had spoken it, with quick light in her eyes and the thin, white line of her lips, does not easily die in a living heart. And now, with the power of evil that she had, at what moment and in what way might she not hurt him with her vengeance?

But to draw that bad drop of blood from her! In quieter moments, he was not blind to the craze of madness of which fear could drive him. While he was beating out the life of the black dog in the barley field, he had known nothing of what he did. But afterwards he had seen himself when terror was gone. It was mad he had been. He knew and admitted that. The sight of the blood of the little beast and the life that was still in it had frenzied him. Supposing she would not consent—that she struggled—that he cut deeper than he meant!

He sickened sometimes at the sight of the pictures his imagination recalled to him. Only too ready was he to procrastinate. He made no comment upon her absence. He sent no message asking for her help. All he did in preparation was to sharpen his knife upon the grindstone in the yard—glad when it was done—glad when it was lying back again in the depth of his pocket out of sight.

To Mary, going down into the village as the evening fell and only when it was necessary to buy food at Foley's shop,

ignorant of those things that were happening at the farm, time dragged itself by in a weary procession of days. Fennel could make no certain promise that they would go to America. Nevertheless he had given his word that as soon as the fishing season was over, they would leave Ardnashiela and North or East or whichever way it was, they would put the long miles between them and that place.

Once she was sure of this, then, as in the manner of slow water falling drop by drop, the days began to loiter away with her counting of them. It was not difficult to hide her fears from him. A smile could dispel his suspicions. He had promised more than it had seemed possible that any man would do for a woman. Summoning all her courage, she set herself to face those remaining weeks with a cheerfulness that should hide her distress from him. Partly it was hidden from herself. She did not actually know herself what it was she feared.

The sense of calamity was about her. She was aware of little more than that. Every time she went down into the village, even in the dark of evening, there were sullen glances from those who had once looked at her with pity.

She was half conscious, without the materialisation of words to name it in her thoughts, of a power to do her harm. It was not in this person or in that. It was not in Maggie Kelleher she feared it, or in any one of those who sped their sombre looks across her as she passed down the street. There were those in Foley's shop who drew away from her when she went in. Her fear was not of these. In all that place there seemed to be not only the wish to do her evil, but behind it some indefinite force, slowly encompassing her just as she had seemed to feel the ghosts of death surrounding her that evening in the Gap of Doon.

In some voiceless instinct of perception, she reached the faint recognition of their faith. It was far from her power

to realise its deep significance. It was not in her to appreciate how life treads always, however wide its hold, upon the verges of the unknown. She could not have reasoned how with just that quality of faith it leans out into the void and, with its beliefs, preserves itself from the abomination of desolation in the supportless realms of space.

All in sensation that she felt in conscious impulse was the craving desire to shout aloud the truth, to cry out to them, there in the street, that it was none of the faeries that had taken her, but life only in a mad moment of love. Then they would understand the empty folly of all they believed and if it was shame it brought her, there were moments when even that seemed better than this accumulating suspicion of evil, gathering with all the sounds of fate about her.

Nothing but her care, her pride and tenderness for her man held her from this as the days went by. As well there was the faint light of that narrow way of escape, distant though it seemed those days, beyond which she had her moments of vision of the sweetness of life she had known with her child and him. With all the courage in her soul, arming her against the heaped forebodings of fate, she summoned the strength of her spirit to meet the weary waiting of the days.

The weather held. The wind from the West persisted. Nearly every day there were shoals of sprat and mackerel and quantities of pollock and whiting in the Bay.

"If we go on this way," Fennel informed her, "'twill be the best year ever I had at the fishin'. Maybe 'tis to America we'll be goin' yet."

No one was catching fish anywhere else along the coast. Fennel was sometimes taking his hauls into Doonvarna around the headlands and getting an exceptional price for them.

He laughed at the good fortune that was coming to him.

"'Tis none of the bad luck ye're bringin' me," he said to her. "Didn't I know always 'twas the kindness of life ye had for me from that day when I first saw ye milkin' the cows?"

She laughed with him, but felt none of it in her heart. When would it end, she cried to herself. When would the weather break and the wind turn? Each morning when first she woke, she looked out of the window at the little ships of the lofty clouds, sailing high above the water line with no freight of rain.

They were always coming from the West.

It was about ten days after her last visit to the farm, when Fennel was out with the nets in the middle of the bay where she could see his boat at work. She was sitting in the open doorway, for even the far sight of him out there on the water was a comfort to the timid thing her heart had become.

Except when there was a burying in the grave-yard on that upper road, few passed that way. The cliff road, where they had lived before, was shorter to the headlands. Whenever she heard any one coming, she withdrew into the cottage and closed the door, watching who it was from within behind the pieces of lace curtain she had hung in the window.

The sun was as hot as ever that morning—the clouds as high, the wind as faintly blowing in a steady stream of warmth from the West. Presently, as she sat there sewing, a sound, familiar more in her heart than her ears, grew into the silence around her. She held her needle with a stitch half made. It was the tapping—tapping—tapping of a stick along the road.

With no thought conscious to arrest it, her heart stood still. She stood up and stepped down from the doorway and

saw what she had supposed. It was the blind man from the farm. Had he taken the wrong road? What was he doing there? Did he know it was only to the cliffs that way could lead him?

She stood there on the roadside silent, waiting to see what he would do. If it was blind he had been from his birth, the sense of touch he had, served him with faithful precision. Feeling the grass tufts at the side of the road, he came steadily onward towards her with unerring steps.

On the further side was a steep grass bank, sloping precipitately to the backs of the cottages on the cliff road. With true judgment for his safety, he had chosen his path on that side on which the cottage stood. There the bank rose above him. If he strayed from his path, he could only fall against it.

What was it he wanted? If he was leaving the farm again, why had he come that way? She waited, almost with her breath held as she watched his approach.

With the first outer wall of the cottage, the grass tufts ceased. His stick, feeling out like the antennæ of a moth in the blindness of light, struck the stone of the wall. He paused and raised his head. She could see the knowledge with its accompaniment of calculation that had come to him. Then, tapping the wall, he came on. She slipped into the open door before he was near.

Along the wall, his stick came tapping and then, waving it, with sensing curves and motions in the open space of the door, he stopped and raised his hand again.

"Are ye there, Mary Fennel?" he said, as though even in that silence, he were certain of her presence, he had not even raised his voice to call her. It was in the mere address of his words that he spoke out.

"What is it ye want, blind man?" she murmured.

"Is himself there?"

"He is not."

"Is he out in the Bay with the wind is in the West?"

"He is."

"Himself at the farm is wantin' ye."

She swallowed back a sensation in her throat.

"What's he wantin' me for?"

"There was a cow died in the sudden throw of a stroke this morning."

She summoned the sound of her voice in her throat.

"What's that to do with meself?" she asked.

He did not answer that.

"'Twas himself told me to tell ye to be comin' down to the farm," he said, "and shure, haven't I told ye? I have indeed."

He turned up the white of his eye-balls and with such direction of his blindness as he could imbue them with, he rested them on her eyes as he leant forward into the doorway.

"Don't go," he whispered. "'Tis I'm tellin' ye—don't go."

When he had said that, he turned away. Down the length of the cottage wall his stick tapped loudly and then fell to a muffled note as it beat once more upon the tufts of grass at the roadside.

VII

MARY slept ill that night. She told her husband nothing of the visit of the blind man. The presentiment that something would happen to prevent their going away was shadowed across every thought that passed in her mind. If she were to tell Fennel of her fears that her father wished to do her harm, that might happen which would fall across her slender passage of escape. The fisherman was not one to bear malice, but nothing would ever have induced an affection in him for James Kirwan, while the slightest offence against a thing so near to his heart as Mary might easily rouse him to the vehemence of hatred.

All that had happened she kept closely to herself. When Fennel informed her they had lost a cow down at the farm, information of common property he had heard the moment his boat came in, she professed to have heard it for the first time.

Again that night before he went to sleep, she asked him, as she had done so many times in the last few days, when he thought the fishing would be over.

"How much longer will the wind last in the West?" she said.

Sleep was close about him, hovering on his eyes. He murmured something about good promise in the fall of the sun and then sleep had him away from her. She lay alone with her wakefulness, watching the stars that hung like dew in a cobweb through the mesh of her lace curtains. The first film of dawn had swept them away before she found her

release and lay with such little peace as there was in her dreams beside him.

After his breakfast in the morning, Fennel went down to the sea-wall to mend a patch in his net.

"Can't ye use that one is hangin' over the rafter?" she asked him," and be sittin' with meself this mornin' till they call ye out for the boat?"

He laid a hand about her shoulder. He told her he had used that net all those days that his good luck was coming to him and it was not putting it aside he'd be then for the mere stretch of a rent was in it.

"Shure come and sit down with me yeerself, on the sea-wall. There's the full warmth of the sun is there in that place."

He stopped. For the moment until he saw her eyes, he had forgotten the things they were all saying and the wish there was in her to be away forever from Ardnashiela.

"Ye never go out at all these days," he said in another tone.

She had her baby in her arms and did no more than look at it and then at him. He took the little creature's face in his fingers. The skin of its cheeks was soft like the skin of a mushroom and his hands knotted and dark as the twisted roots of a tree.

"Doesn't he sleep at all?" he asked, "and couldn't ye be slippin' out for a while then? There's warm health for ye in the light of the sun."

She would have health enough, she told him, once they were away from Ardnashiela with the peace that would be for her then. She roused the courage to smile and put up her face when she had said it, asking with her eyes for a kiss from him and, as he kissed her, she said—

"I've never said I loved ye, Joe Fennel."

"Ye have not," said he.

"Then God hears me sayin' it now," she whispered.

He went out of the door and down the slope of the bank to a passage between the cottages on the cliff road. There were some through their open doors heard him singing as he walked down to the sea-wall, and wondered what there could be to drag a song out of him with the wife he had.

Mary stood looking after him till, head and shoulders, he dropped out of sight below the sharp descent of the bank.

That was true what she had said. Tenderness had turned to love, so different from that she had once known as to seem a language in another tongue and in another world. She thought of that other now as of some miracle that had happened, Fate choosing her out for the hidden meaning of it. For surely if this was love, this quiet gentleness she felt in her heart for her man, it was no less than a miracle that other could have been. Out of time and space and the world about, it had lifted her. She was all too conscious of what was happening and could happen to her now.

Here she had no faith or trust in life. But then her belief in the wonder of it transcended circumstance. It had had wings. It flew as the gulls flew over the headlands, mounting the utmost pinnacles of the wind, casting themselves down, immune, with rigid wing into the abysses of the storm.

She loved now. That was true. A gentle fashion of love only that had no urging passion of faith in it to nerve her heart against that void of the unknown. Even in Fennel's strength and the close protection of his arm, she had no wholesome trust. There was something beyond her in that place, from which, with all the confidence she had in him, he could not save her.

These were her presentiments. Only the day before that visit of the blind man had intensified them. She did not know what that something was, but surely she felt the heavy

oppression of its presence. Sometimes she even wondered whether it would not pursue her wherever they went. Never once in her love for Father Costello had she felt the pressing weight of evil. She allowed that she had committed sin, but sin for which it seemed to her there was ease of absolution. It was not this that followed her mind with fear, but more the consciousness of that false foundation upon which now the whole of her life was built.

With the indeterminate wanderings of these thoughts, Fennel left her that morning when he went down to the seawall. For a long while she stood at the doorway in the bright heat of the sun, pursuing one consideration after another to its vague and inconclusive issue. When at last her eyes settled with a changed focus upon things she saw, her baby was asleep in her arms.

He surely was something no retribution in life could rob her of. She touched her lips first upon one of his eyes and then upon the other. He did not wake. Carrying him over to the bed, she laid him down.

Now she might be slipping out for a while—an hour out there alone on the headlands. More and more did her presentiments drive her to carry by herself the burden of her thoughts. She kissed her baby again, mere breaths of kisses about his neck and in the soft yellow down of his hair, then, closing the door behind her, she went out.

The day was cloudless, the West wind faint and fitful that carried with it the cries of the gulls out at sea and again in moments let them fall to a breathless stillness.

Just such a day as that it had been when she had first gone out in the boat with Fennel and seen that black figure, painted without motion against the face of the rocks.

Her mind wandered uneasily about her memories, seeking release from her forebodings in this or that, then, one after another, casting them worthless aside. There was some

shiftless spirit of disquiet in her mind she could not escape. She had had it the night before. She had wakened with it in the morning. It would not be put away.

In a sudden moment, one of those imperative fears which leap into being unawares, started in her thoughts the apprehension of an unknown danger to her child. Notwithstanding all her efforts to put it away, the folly of it clung to her. Yet what harm could come to him? He was sure to sleep for an hour at least. For scarcely fifteen minutes had she been out. She tried to force herself to walk on. If apprehension as unreasonable as this should master her, what mercy or quiet would there be for her in life at all?

She knew just how far it was to go back, yet there was the impulsive desire in her mind just to see and measure it with her eye. She looked round over her shoulder.

On the cliff path by the first headland, she saw the figure of a man. For an instant she stood still. In all those wide stretches of heather and gorse and rock, across that still breadth of sea, there seemed no life but his and hers. In every sense of her body all of nature seemed dead to her but just the life there was in him and the life there was in her. The world about her was empty and void. Every memory, every thought and every hope she had clung to to save herself from that falling over the verge of the unknown, snatched their support away. It was her father.

She looked about her with quick, starting eyes. There was no debate in her mind, no question of why he sought her there or whether it was her he sought at all. Her one thought was to get away.

Over the rise of the next headland was the edge of rock below the cliff's edge where she had talked that morning with the priest. It could not be seen from the top of the cliff. There was no beaten path to it. There was hiding there. She caught her breath and she ran. Over the rise of the

headland she would be out of sight. He would not see where she had gone.

A witlessness was come to her now in all her thoughts. Did she think he would never find her? Did she think she could stay there all night? Was there real cause for her to be running away from him at all? Two thoughts had the high voice of terror in her mind above all others. She was remembering him that evening in the barley field when he killed her dog. She was hearing the voice of the blind man as he said, "Don't go—'tis I'm tellin' ye—don't go!"

At the crest of the headland's rise she looked back over her shoulder again. He was running as well. Then a faint cry leapt from her lips as she sped on.

It seemed to her in her descent of the cliff as her feet slipped over the loose stones, that now it was only the repetition of life, the fateful recurrence of what had happened when she was struggling over the potato field and heard those two gun shots in the still air. Or again in the Gap of Doon when the mist had flung down upon her from the hillside, pursuing her with the ghosts of death. Now, here once more, pursuit. No step she took held for her. The stones rattled down the face of the cliff and fell with deep sounds into the caverns and hollows below.

Breath was exhausted and all strength gone from her when she reached the ledge of rock. In the fierce sunlight she lay there, her face against the hot stone, with the sea pinks in bloom about her. Between the distress of her breathing, she listened with every sense. The cries of the gulls passed her on a breath of wind. Then there was silence. They passed again. Then silence once more—silence—all silence.

At last, from the cliff above her, the faint sound of her name.

The stillness of death lay upon her. Only her nostrils worked for her breath. When she heard it again it was

nearer. Had he seen her make the beginning of her descent? Would he find her in the end? What did he come for? What did he want? She rose to her knees to listen. In the warm quiet of that sunlight, where there were bees humming over the heather tufts, and rock pigeons flying with no alarm between the headlands, and a few sheep grazing peacefully on the short grass of the cliffs above, there she was kneeling with hands clutching together and lips parted in terror that was painted on her white face like a pale mask.

There and like that, Kirwan found her. It was as though fate had chased her to its end. She could not move. She could not cry out. She stared at him.

"What was it ye were runnin' for and hidin' down here?" he asked her with short breaths.

Even to that she could not reply.

"Why didn't ye come down yesterday to the farm when I sent for ye?"

She shook her head and stood unsteadily to her feet, moving such distance as the narrow ledge would give her from him.

"Did the blind man tell ye what happened on us yesterday?"

"He did."

"Did ye know the milk was soured a week or so ago?"

Her answer was in her breath. He did not hear it.

"And me crops have been spoilt on me and Cotter's child was sick a while back, and weren't ye waitin' there on the rocks the time Michael Kelleher got his death?"

He had said it all, the whole count of her arraignment. When he saw that mask of horror on her face, it was not, he felt, that she was afraid of him. More and more as he stood there with her close in that place, the sheer cliff dropping down three hundred feet and more into the sea, fear of her was lifting to a panic of alarm in him.

Why had he trusted himself there with her? Wasn't it a fool he had been to be coming out there on the cliffs alone with one had the power of evil that was hers. As they stood there, staring at each other, the very sound of their breathing was a frightening noise in his ears. He spoke again to hear himself speaking.

"There's a bad drop is in ye," he said, "aren't they all sayin' that? 'Tis not meself only."

His hand felt to his pocket. The knife was ready there. Fixed as her eyes were upon his face, they were swift away to see that movement of his hand.

"What is it ye're goin to do to me?" she cried out.

The note in her voice shrilled through him and sickened his heart with misgiving. That cry, as of one terrorised in sleep, has the voice of the lowest instincts in it. It is scarce human. He heard it then. It was of something that was not human in her. He wished, with the name of God muttered in his throat, he had never come out there to that place alone.

"Be still, blast ye!" said he—but much more it was his own heart he was silencing. And then he told why it was he had sent for her and what it was he wanted now that he had followed her out there. She listened, smothering the sound of her breathing with her hand against her mouth.

Her blood! And it was Shaughnessy had told him! She saw him then again when he moved towards her, as she had seen him in the barley field with the frenzy of fear fuming to murder in his face. All this was a trick and no mere folly of belief. Her blood! She knew well what he meant to do. That cajoling note in his voice! That was how he had enticed the dog out of the house and then dragged it away to the seclusion of the fields, as here he had driven her. Her blood! It was all her life he wanted.

Every need and desire there was in her then for living sped in vivid thoughts and loud-sounding voices through her

mind. She must live! How could she die there in that sudden moment without word of a priest in her ears! She thought of her baby waking and finding none there in that room. She heard its cry, calling to her across the headlands. When she turned to look behind her, there was no escape. Only the sheer height of the cliff—death everywhere about her.

The truth came then at last with a loud cry of her voice out of that black secret hidden in her heart. With words that flung upon each other in their speed to be free and out of the resentful prison of her soul, she thrust upon him the story of all that had happened her that night in the Gap of Doon.

"Faeries!" she cried at him. "Is it fools ye are the lot of ye and ye thinkin' when women lose their wits 'tis the faeries have them taken! Shure, God help ye! Aren't there mightier things in life to be frettin' the souls of us than Themselves or any wispy sight or sound ye'd be hearin' on a dark night!"

She leant back against the rock with her eyes spent in their terror watching his face to see the truth strike him back.

During all that time, while she had been speaking, he had stood, waiting as he listened, with the knife open and ready in his hand. Not until she had finished and the sound of the last word had gone from her lips did he move. She heard him laugh.

"D'ye think ye can make me believe the turn of a tale like that?" he said slowly, "with all the things that have happened me since ye came back, and Michael Kelleher lying there a dead man up in the grave-yard! Is it turnin' the world upside down ye'd be, with a lie on ye're lips is the like of that?"

If it was the truth she had told him, it was a greater truth she herself was facing now. Here was the power—the power

of their faith, that had pursued and driven her in her sentiments to this.

He believed—he still believed. All of them, were she to shout it in the village street, they would still believe. It was not the truth of circumstance that mattered!

As he laid his hand on her, all thought fled from her mind and left her to the terror of his first touch upon her arm. Her voice lifted to that same shrilling cry. She struggled and beat her hands upon his head and face as his arms bound about her.

His thought only was to use his knife. Then suddenly it seemed to him in her strength and the sound in her voice he was fighting against some power the darkness of which even that sunlight could neither penetrate nor dispel. As he felt her hands beating against his face, the sight of his reason went from him. He lifted her from her feet and flung her down. Death was the only way to rid himself of the evil he felt about him.

She fell away from the thrust of his hands. It was death he was wishing for her then, and down that three hundred feet onto the rocks below, she fell into the long, waiting arms of it.

VIII

FENNEL sat mending his net on the sea-wall, but there was no moment while he worked that his thoughts were wholly with what he was doing. Again and again across the listening ear of his memory, he heard the voice of Mary claiming the witness of God that she loved him now.

It was early morning for any of them to be sitting out there on the wall. All but Fennel himself in Ardnashiela had the name for laziness. Only the old man from the islands above the coast of Galway was there for company with him because it was a poor house he lived in and there was more pleasure for him to be sitting out there on a warm day than by the empty grate in his little room.

Sometimes there was a song below the spoken sound of Fennel's voice as he worked, and between the lagging interludes of their talk the old man watched him, listening to his song, with an enquiring expression in his face.

"Ye've a song in yeer heart," said he presently.

The fisherman did not look up from the twine he was knotting.

"Why wouldn't I?" he replied.

"Aren't ye feared at all the harm might be comin' to ye, with herself in and out of the house?"

"I am not."

"Well, God save ye from it, for ye're the most deservin' man in this mean corner of a place."

Fennel laid down his net on the wall.

"Were'nt we all sayin' here wan time," said he, "'twas those only had a poor content with themselves would be troubled with the harm might be comin' to them? Didn't ye tell us of wan yeerself, was cot away by a woman he saw singin' to him in the water and when it was three years he'd gone away with her, wasn't he comin' back as discontented with himself as ever, the way he took no care of his house at all and the water drippin' in through the roof of it?"

"I mind that well indeed," said the old man, "for 'twas a man in Galway. Didn't I see him meself sittin' at the door of his house in the sleeves of his shirt and they torn on him!"

"'Twas those would be like that are troubled," said Fennel, "and 'tis not that way I am meself at all. Haven't I a child up there in the house and herself with a great kindness is about her at all times?"

"Maybe 'tis not believin' in Them one way or another ye are?"

Fennel laid his net down and stood up from the wall—the more he talked of her, the more he heard her words that she loved him, and he was thinking now it was a poor thing in him to have gone away from her then when she had wished him to stay. Had she not made her heart open as it were for him to be hiding in it?

"Yirra, what would I be believin' in at all," he said, as he stood there high above the old man and looked down at the withered waste of the body he was carrying to its grave, "if it wasn't believin' in Themselves I was? But isn't it kind They are as well as cruel and if there's anything at all I have lying with a fear in me heart, 'tis Themselves takin' her back again for the sweet kindness there is in her."

It was a fear that was not deep in him then, for the old man could hear the song in his voice as he walked back to his house up the cliff road. Even when a few minutes later

he opened the door and found the room empty of her, and the child asleep on their bed, there was no thought of fear in him. She had gone out. She had taken his advice and was away on the headlands maybe, and for a moment he thought of following her there to say, if he could find the words for it, that he was ashamed of himself to be leaving her that morning with the sweet sound of her love she had left in his ears.

It was even to the door he was going when the baby woke at the sharp sound of his moving in the room. It woke with the tremor of a cry and he came back to it. She would wish that, more than his going out there to meet her. He sat down on the side of the bed and tried to soothe it in its crying. But still it cried and tossed where it lay, so that he knew somehow it was the want of the feeling of hands about it that it had, and nothing would quieten it till it felt the warmth and rest of a body's arms to be lying in.

With timid hands, he took it up. To the best of his memory, he tried to hold it as he had seen her do. Bringing it then to the doorway where the sun fell, he sat down on the sill. With constant misgivings he placed it upon his knee, and looked into the blue circle of its eyes.

"Shure, I don't want anything more human than yeerself," he said to it. "D'ye hear that? Isn't it mine ye are? Didn't she put ye in me arms the other day? And what was that but herself knowin' it with the love was comin' to her that time?"

The blue eyes looked back into his own. A twinkle spread about them. Then there came three bubbles of a laugh spluttering out of the corners of its lips. Fennel laughed with it. Out of the voice of his gladness then came the sound of the song he had been singing all that morning beneath his breath—

“Knock at the door of a white thorn tree
Lift up the latch and cry
‘Are you there—are you there? My love is gone.
Have you heard her feet go by?’ ”

He had heard her sing it as women do to suit their love.
And he sang it himself as a man would to suit his own—

“Have ye heard her steps go by?”

(1)

THE END

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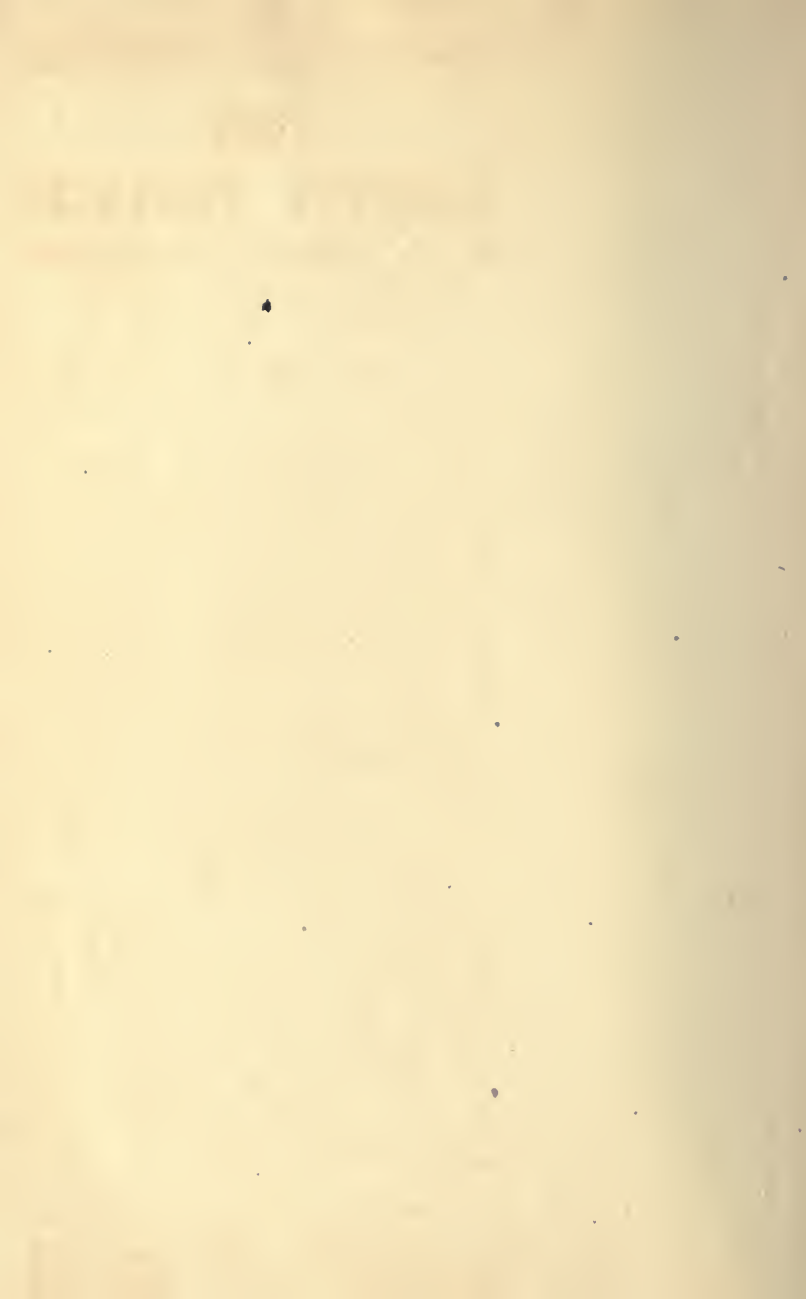
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